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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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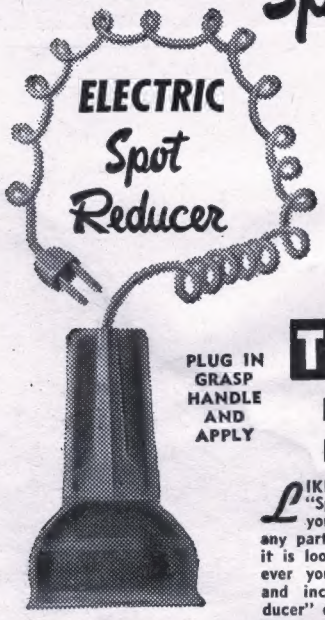

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VOL. 45, No. 3 FEBRUARY, 1952

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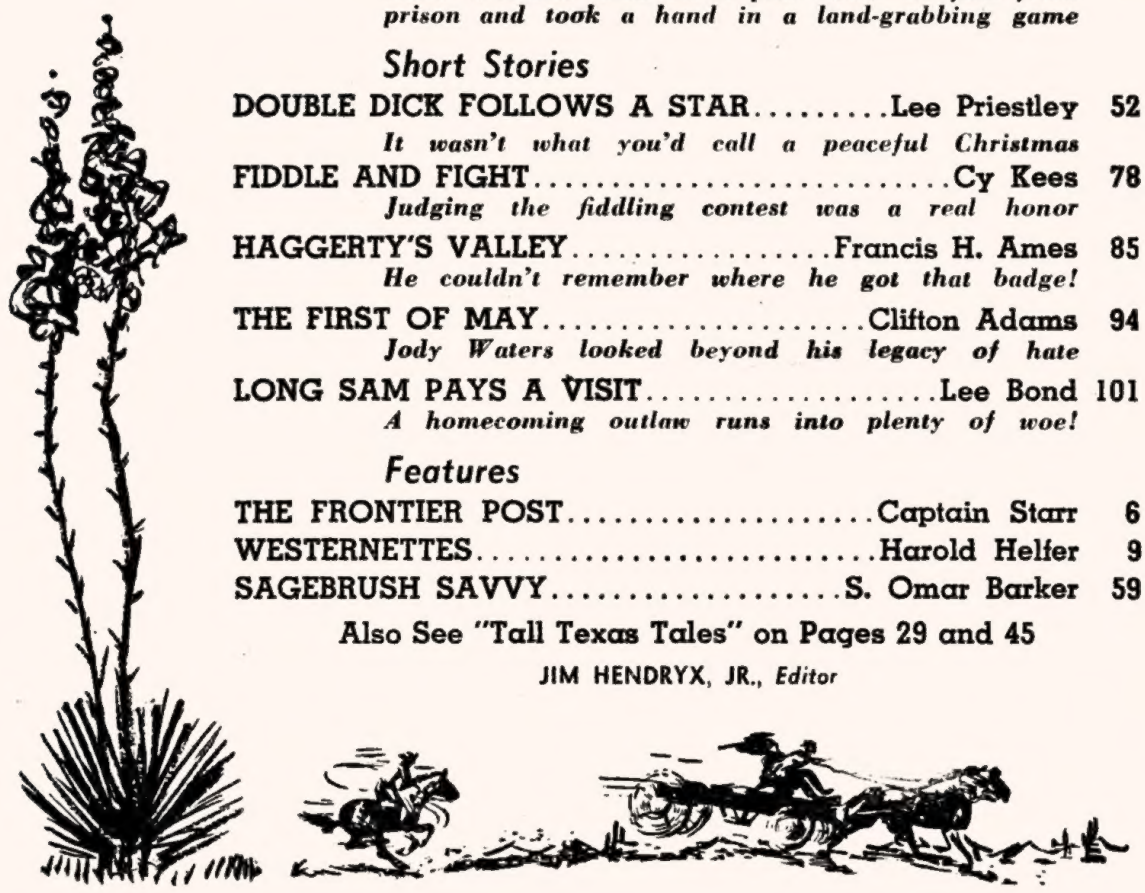
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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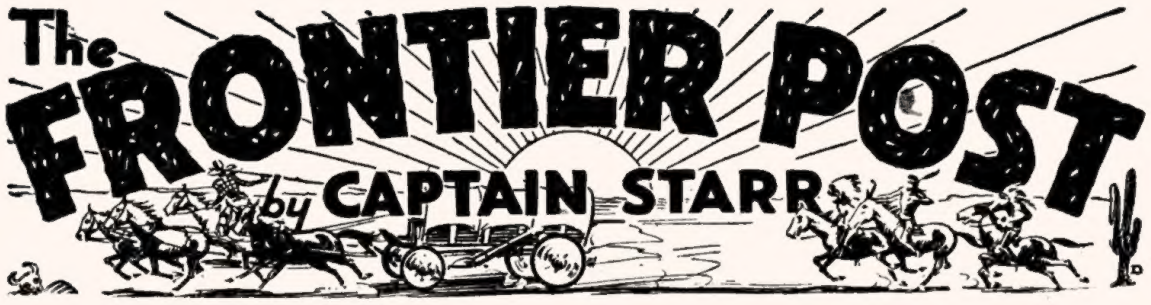

The Square Dance Craze

A RETIRED cop, by the name of Roy Rogers, with time on his hands, got bored just sitting around in the desert sunshine. So, to amuse himself and a few friends, he tackled a few simple square dances.

In all the years before, about the only time he ever shook a foot was at the annual policemen's ball. So he had to start from scratch.

But now, Roy Rogers is probably as popular from Texas west as his movie-star namesake. His pastime has grown into a business that keeps him on the hop as much as seven nights a week.

Ladies to the center and back to the bar,
Gents to the center with a right hand star.

The square dance craze has taken hold like a prairie fire. You gals and galluses, young and old, who haven't had a try at it sure are missing a big thrill.

It's not new. The typical hoedown probably started in early day New England, being the colonial version of the stately minuet, quadrille and reel. The story is that New York damsels beguiled British officers in the Revolutionary War at a square dance so as to give the American Army time to retreat to White Plains.

Soon the square dance took on a Southern tinge, with hillbilly music and quaint calls.

Cat in the barn, rat in her mouth,
Swing that gal like they do down South.

But now the square dance has gone Western, with a cowboy twang to music, calls and costumes. The wholesome gayety reaches way beyond cowboyland, though. There are square dance camps from Idaho to Vermont. There are square dance tours and schools and toggeries everywhere, also institutes that train leaders and callers. Violinists are learning to fiddle.

Now tie that knot like the cowboys do,
With a dishrag turn and a fast one-two.

Almost any of the old tunes make square dance music, and in the old days one fiddle kept folks cavorting all night. Nowadays it's records, or where the crowd is big enough a crack hoedown orchestra that plays a circuit. The fiddler is the star. He's a temperamental artist, and keeping the fiddler happy isn't easy. A crack fiddler wound up an argument awhile back at a resort shindig by throwing down his $1400 fiddle and jumping on it.

Grab a gal and away you go,
Find her a seat and let her blow.

SQUARE DANCE bugs will tell you it takes about six months of pretty steady practice to get good at it. You can go on from there and spend a lifetime learning more. A tophand caller knows about 300 dances. How many more there are, is anybody's guess.

I asked Roy Rogers which square dance is the hardest, and he said "Texas Tornado," he thought, which he calls to the tune of "Tennessee Wagoner" or "Chinese Breakdown."

I plumb agree with him. Because about the third night that I was learning to prance, I got grabbed by charming Missus Roy (Eva Rogers), and dragged into a set of experts. In her skillful, professional hands I came out of it alive and in one hunk, but haven't yet got my hocks untangled proper.

Seesaw your pretty little taw,
Meet your honey and box the gnat.

Such calls as that, and a flock of others, sound like pure gibberish. But they're not. Such ones as "allemande left" and "do si do" and "promenade" have exact meanings. The first thing for a beginner to catch onto

is the meaning of each call—and how to make his feet savvy at the same time.

The woods are full of crackerjack callers besides Roy Rogers and some sing their calls and have their own fancy twists and numbers. But for an ex-flatfoot to become a dancing master is what makes his career extraordinary.

He was having a good time one night down at Palm Springs when Jimmie Davis, ex-governor of Louisiana saw and heard him. Jimmie, being a showman, liked the Rogers personality, so the next thing Roy knew he was up at Las Vegas, calling at one of the fashionable dude hotels. Then back to Palm Springs, with just time to grab a bowl of chili beans, to put on another dance. Then somewhere else, and all around.

It led to a tempting contract offer from an Eastern theater chain. Then Roy put his big foot down. The pace was getting too lively for a tired-out lawman turned out to grass. He tries to hold down to a three-a-week schedule. After all, even a caller has to sleep sometime.

Chase the possum, chase the coon.
Chase that little gal around the moon.

THERE'S nothing nicer to see than a dance floor full of folks going through intricate steps in perfect time. From the platform, it looks like a flower unfolding, Roy says.

Chicken in the bread pan,
Pickin' up dough,
Big pig rootin'
The little 'tater row.

A good many callers mix waltzes, one-steps and two-steps in between square dances, to keep everybody happy. There's also a flare for folk dances, the various polkas and schottishes. The big advantage in these is that no caller is needed, so they can be put on anywhere, anytime, even with juke-box music.

First and third do a half sashay,
Swing that gal from Arkansaw,
Skip your partner, turn to the next,
Now swing your honey,
Till she feels funny
Bounce the gal up and down,
Promenade around the town.

Square dancing is exercise, recreation, a heap of social fun and more besides. For shy folks it's the best cure for self-consciousness, they claim. If you're itching for a real good-time frolic, get out and swing your partner at a square dance.

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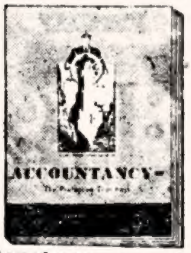

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By
HAROLD HELFER

●

Alexander Majors, one of the most renowned of all pioneer bullwhackers, was the promoter of the pony express that operated between San Francisco and Independence and employed 40,000 oxen, 1000 mules and 4000 men. He was one of the most pious men of frontier days. He is said never to have used a single word of profanity and before he'd hire a man he had to take an oath that he wouldn't cuss, use liquor, gamble or be unkind to an animal.

Here's an item out of Dallas the like of which probably will never come out of Texas again. Arrested for draft evasion, a Texan youth explained his reluctance to get drafted as follows: "Too many people getting killed in the Army. I don't like violence."

Since today's Indian dresses in blue jeans and shirts like any other westerner, the tribe of Blackfoot Indians appearing in a new movie on location in Wyoming had to be outfitted with traditional tribal costumes. Soon after they started work a small brave whined to his mother, "I'm tired of playing Indians. Let's go home."

The largest lump of coal ever mined in one piece was at Carbon County, Utah. It weighed 20,000 pounds.

Blackbird, the Omaha chief, was a proud horseman and when he died in 1800 he was buried sitting on his favorite horse.

Marlo Brando, the sensational star of "A Streetcar Named Desire," is investing his earnings in a Nebraska cattle ranch.

Two Victoria girls, Ann Wilson and Phyllis Elwood, recently duplicated the feat of British Columbia, Canada, pioneer settlers, and rode two horses across the Rockies. The trip took nine weeks.

Mississippi comes from the Algonquin Indian words for "fish river."

A prized possession of Senator Kenneth McKellar, of Tennessee, is an autographed picture of Cowboy Star Roy Rogers. With all the zest of a small boy, McKellar, dean of the Senate, at 82 eagerly watches cowboy films on TV and in Washington theaters. He's seen hundreds of 'em.

When the Spanish conquistadors first reached Mexico City it was a series of villages built over the waters of a lake.

Santa Claus must meet a language qualification to work in Santa Fe. Before last Christmas, a large department store advertised: "Need Santa Claus to start work at once. Must speak Spanish."

Hatfield, still on the seat of the wagon, drew and fired

PANHANDLE

Scouring Texas for a brutal outlaw killer, the fighting Ranger hits the High Plains and meets the challenge of plotters for big pickings!

FREIGHT

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

The Girl on the Stage

A CLUSTER of corrals and sod-roofed 'dobes, Cottonwood Station shimmered in the heat waves of this high, wind-scoured flatlands. As Dave Fox rolled in slowly along the dusty stage road, hunkered on the big grain wagon's jouncing seat, he could see Smalley, the agent, waiting shirtless in the dog run that divided the station building.

Fox didn't blame him for hugging shade. His own shirt was dark with sweat at the armpits, with wider circles of white salt where the hot wind had dried it. The canvas wagon cover snapped with a nagging, steady constancy. He wondered if the ceaseless winds that scoured these High Plains made the heat any more bearable, or only added to its irritant.

Smalley lifted a hand in greeting and eased into the open as Dave swung wide, bringing his four-mule team to a stand beside the feed barn and water tank. Kicking on the brake, the freighter pulled

off his sweat-brimmed hat, that stuck briefly, mopped a shirt sleeve across his forehead, and ran his fingers through matted, drab-brown hair.

He had weather-whipped features, lean to the verge of boniness, but with a clear vigor in eyes that were red-rimmed now, from squinting across sun-smeared distances. · Thirty years old, and a scrapper during most of them, Dave Fox measured a fraction under average height. As he replaced the hat, he turned to clamber stiffly down the high wheel from the wagon-box.

"Figured I'd be seeing you today, or tomorrow at the latest," remarked Ed Smalley, around the corncob pipe clamped in his bearded mouth. "You generally make it right on the nose with these grain deliveries."

"This will be the last one," Dave Fox said, moving forward to lift a hoof of the near swing mule and examine it carefully. "My contract with the stageline ends with this delivery." He straightened, satisfied with the condition of the hoof.

"Say, that's right," grunted Smalley, with a scowl. "I'd lost sight that the stage company changing hands would knock you out of a piece of business. Too dang bad. Makes two of us that are out of luck."

Fox, unhitching the lead team to lead the animals to the water trough, glanced at him quickly. "You, Ed?"

"Yep. Got my notice last week. Ain't no never mind to Matt Wycoff how long I been holding down this job. Got some hanger-on of his own he wants to turn the station over to, soon as he takes control." The man shrugged philosophically. "His privilege, of course. He buys a stageline, he can do what he wants with it. Like he can cancel your grain contract so as to haul the station feed in his own wagons. Well, we could do the same, if we was big like Wycoff."

BUT Dave Fox was scowling as he took the lead mules over to the trough and watched carefully to prevent their drinking too much. Coming back with them to get the second pair, he said, "It still don't seem right, kicking out a good man that's been here as long as you, and handled your work as well. What'll you do afterwards, Ed?"

The agent only shrugged. He was not a man to talk much about his private affairs; Dave really knew little about him. Likely the man would drift, he thought, hunting until he found another job of some sort.

Dave Fox shook his head. "Somehow, I don't think this could have happened before Zack Bonniwell got killed. Zack wouldn't have fired you, nor let his partner do it."

"It's only since Zack Bonniwell died that Wycoff's started spreading out the way he has. Panhandle Freight Company was a different outfit, then."

"Don't I know!" grunted Dave, a little bitterly. "Was a time a shotgun freighter like me could compete with them, live-and-let-live. Now, it's a battle for a man to keep from being crowded clean off the trails."

They worked silently, then. Ed Smalley unhooked the wagon tail-gate and began hauling out the big, fifty-pound sacks, shouldering them without difficulty and toting them inside the barn to the grain room. As soon as he had finished watering his team, Dave Fox joined him at this job.

They had just unloaded the last of the sacks consigned to Cottonwood Station when the thin squawl of a trumpet came floating distantly across the hot and windy plain, to southward.

"The Caprock stage!" said Smalley. "Hey, I got to get the fresh team harnessed in a hurry. That swamper I had took off on me."

"I'll lend a hand," said Dave Fox, and fell in beside the larger man as he started legging it for the corrals.

The stage-coach took form in a stain of boiling dust, on the dim southern horizon, and came rolling up the twisting, tawny road. By the time it rocked to a halt beneath the big, reaching cottonwood that gave the station its name, the

new spans were ready to take their places on the pole.

But the driver called down to the sweating Ed Smalley, "No rush this time, Ed. I got to check the grease in that right rear hub. I'm afraid of a hotbox, the way the damned dust gets inside there."

He tossed down the leathers to the men on the ground, and swung off the seat.

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

Passengers were already alighting, seizing any chance to escape for a few minutes the hard cramping of the crowded coach.

Dave and Smalley got the new team into position, and exchanged for the lathered, dusty stage horses. When the job was finished, and four weary horses had been run into the corral, Dave Fox said, "Well, I've got to be rolling. Looks like we won't be seeing each other again, Ed?"

"Guess not. Anyhow, I wish you luck. Don't let Wycoff crowd you!"

They shook hands solemnly. Fox walked back to his big freight wagon. He had put up the tail-board and fastened it, and moved around to climb to the seat when a girl's voice said, timidly, "I beg your pardon."

He turned, in quick surprise. He had been too busy to notice her when she got out of the stage, but he could not keep from staring now—she was that pretty. A black-haired girl, in a dove-gray traveling dress that was crumpled and dust-stained but still set off a most attractive figure. Her face was heart-shaped, pale for this country of fierce sunlight, but with its own delicate coloring. Her eyes were violet-blue.

Under Dave Fox's unintentionally searching stare, she raised a hand to push back the curls that the wind had torn free from beneath her impractical postage stamp hat.

REMEMBERING his manners then, Dave fumbled off his own shapeless Stetson. He was conscious suddenly of the fact that he needed a shave, and that his clothes smelled strongly of horse- and of man-sweat.

He said, "Yes, ma'am? Something you wanted with me?"

"Oh, no," she told him quickly, and smiled. "Not really. I saw the wagon, and just wondered if by any chance you work for the Panhandle Freight and Cattle Company, out of Caprock?"

Something hardened in Dave's eyes. "No ma'am, I don't!" he answered. "Not any. I own this rig, and a couple others. I work for myself."

"Oh."

He sensed he had spoken too curtly. But before he could find better words she observed, "You don't seem to think much of the Wycoff and Bonniwell people."

"I—didn't say that!" he assured. At the same time, he was asking himself who this girl could be, and what interest she could have in the Panhandle Freight Company. She was going to Caprock, obviously, but he never had seen her in that town, which happened to be his own

present headquarters.

She saw his bewilderment. "I think I'd better introduce myself. My name is Ruth Bonniwell. My uncle was a partner in Panhandle Freight, and I'm his only relative. I've never been in Texas before, but a Mr. Wycoff found my address and wrote that my uncle had been killed, and that I'd better come in order to settle the estate. I don't know anything at all about this country, or the freighting business, of course. It's so big, and new—" She frowned, and Dave knew he would never forget the timid look in her pretty eyes as she turned to glance out across the barren plain. "Somehow, I—I'm afraid!"

"No call to be!" he blurted. "The Texas Panhandle is big, and it's probably wild enough compared to where you've lived. But you'll get to love it, if you stay here. You are going to stay?" He added that quickly and with sudden anxiety that her answer should be yes.

Instead, she told him doubtfully, "I don't know. Perhaps—I haven't any people, anywhere that I feel I belong. This Mr. Wycoff wrote that he would like to buy my half of the partnership." She opened a reticule she carried, brought out a small packet of papers. "I have his letters here, and my identification. He wrote for me to be sure and take this particular stage, so that he would know exactly when I was coming and could make suitable arrangements. He's been very kind."

"Uh-huh." Dave Fox had a sudden mental vision of big, bluff Matt Wycoff. "Kind" was not an adjective he would have thought of to describe the man.

Then it occurred to him that he hadn't introduced himself, and he corrected this quickly. "I'm Dave Fox, Miss Bonniwell. Guess I'm a competitor of yours, in this freight business. But I—well, I hope that needn't mean we can't be friendly."

"Oh, I'm sure it needn't," she told him, and smiled again.

The smile churned something up inside Dave Fox and also, in that moment he became aware of a fact he hadn't realized before—she had to tilt her head to talk to him! Dave, who was a little below average height in a land of tall Texas men and women, was suddenly struck with the fact that this girl was exactly the right size for him.

Just then the stage driver's voice broke in, calling from the direction of the coach. "We're ready to roll, lady!"

She answered, then replaced her papers in the reticule, and held out a small hand to Dave. "I'm glad we've met—and I hope we will again." Her voice was warm and sincere.

"S-sure!" stammered Dave, her hand soft in his own callused fingers. He added, on impulse, "When you get to Caprock, I suggest you get in touch with Judge Himber. He's a good man, and he was your uncle's best friend. He'll look out for you."

"Judge Himber," she repeated. "Thank you very much."

SOMETHING made Dave blurt out, "And until you get to know Matt Wycoff better, I—I'd watch my step with him."

"What?" Her violet eyes darkened with perplexity. "Why do you say that? What are you trying to tell me?"

Already he wished he hadn't said it. "Nothing." The driver saved him.

"Lady! We got to hit the road if we want to reach Caprock on schedule!"

"I'm coming!" Ruth Bonniwell looked again at Dave, smiled again tentatively. "Well—" she said. "Good-by."

He stood there motionless as she gathered up her skirts and went away from him across the barren earth of the station yard. The other passengers were a flashily dressed dry goods drummer and a couple of men who looked like cattle buyers. One of them handed Ruth Bonniwell into the stage, then the others followed, and Ed Smalley slammed the door shut.

The driver was already on the box. He yelled up the horses, popped his whip above thir backs. The coach started with

a lurch, settled into motion.

Dave Fox had a last glimpse of the girl's face, in the window. Then the coach had moved past him and was heading northward, a film of lifted dust smearing his view of it. The dust consumed it; and when the tawny cloud settled, the coach was gone.

Only then did he climb slowly to the wagon seat and kick off the brake. Heading south, putting more distance between himself and the girl with every turn of the big wheels, he still found that his thoughts would not be quit of her.

Somehow, what clotted in his mind was the memory of apprehension that had been in her words as she told him, "I'm afraid!"

CHAPTER II

Massacre

THE coach rolled on, pushing hard to recover the time lost at Cottonwood Station. The passengers could do no more than cling to their places and endure, with varying degrees of stoicism, the hard jouncing and the heat and the cruel, dust-laden wind against whose gritty scouring no leather window curtain was of any avail.

Despite the wind, the dust plume of the coach crawled up the Texas sky and hung there, a tawny stain, that could be seen for miles across the flat expanse of the Cap Rock. It reached the searching stare of a man who crouched atop a limestone outcropping, waiting for this signal, and lifted a quick yell of warning from him:

"Heads up! There she comes!"

As he scrambled down from his perch, four roughly dressed men who had been lounging in the shade of the rocks were going into motion.

In fast time they had saddle cinches tightened on horses that had been loose held, in readiness. Mounted, they poised at the edge of the rock cover, waiting the few remaining moments while the stage drew nearer their hiding place.

Neck cloths had been pulled up across the faces of the men, just below the eyes. All of them seemed calm enough, accustomed to this sort of thing—all except one, a solid figure in the saddle, who fidgeted nervously as he watched the oncoming stage. As though absent-mindedly he groped into a pocket of his shirt, fished out a kitchen match and snapped it alight on broad thumbnail. The sharp crack of it brought the cold stare of the thin, sharp-nosed leader of the four toughs swinging toward him.

"Danged firebug!" this man snorted. "Calm down, can't you—and quit striking those matches! Why did your boss insist on sending you along on this deal, anyhow?"

The nervous man looked at the tiny flame flickering between his fingers, then flipped the match away and lifted his head to meet the leader's dark stare. "I'm looking after the boss' interests," he answered harshly. "And I'm going to have me some fun while I'm at it!" He slapped a square tin can tied to his saddle strings. Liquid sloshed within.

The leader grunted with plain distaste. "Well, keep your matches away from that kerosene, or you'll have you a bigger blaze than you're figuring on!"

Turning away then, he stood in stirrups to take a look along the stage road, where the pound of hoofs, the racket of wheels and timbers and jingling harness chains were boiling nearer now. He lifted a hand above his head, the other holding the reins high against his gaunt chest. He swept the raised hand forward.

"Now!"

To the bite of spurs the five mounts leaped forward. They came down out of the rocks, fanning out, and the brassy sun struck light from the barrels of naked six-guns. The stage-coach was surrounded almost before the whip could yell to his horses, dropping reins as he swept a double-snouted shotgun from the seat beside him. He got the gun to his

shoulder, but a six-gun bullet took him. He doubled forward, pitched head-first down the side of the coach.

That was the only resistance. The bandits knew their work and each acted on a pre-arranged assignment. While one spurred quickly to check the frightened teams and settle them, the rest closed in upon the coach. The leader shouted to the passengers:

"Don't touch a gun! Come out, with your hands next to your ears—and empty!"

No one within the coach seemed inclined to argue with him. Leaning from saddle, he yanked open the door. Prodded by sharp orders, the occupants came piling out into the road ruts. As soon as they lit, a couple of the masked men were there to relieve them of belt-guns, and slap their pockets in search of hidden weapons. The drummer gave a squawk of protest as a bulging wallet was plucked from his clothing, but an unceremonious shove pushed him into the lineup with the cattle buyers.

LAST to step down was the girl, her pretty face white with fear. With a quick movement, the leader jerked the little reticule from her hands and, despite her cry of protest, tossed it over to the man he had called a firebug.

"There!" he snapped. "See if what your boss wants is inside."

The other man ripped the bag open and dug out a packet of papers and letters, held together by a rubber band. He thumbed through these hurriedly. "Yeah! This is it, Peso. I'll take charge of it." He shoved the bag and papers into a pocket.

"All right," growled the man called Peso. To the girl, who had found her voice and was protesting the seizure of her papers, he said curtly, "Don't give us no trouble, you hear?" and the danger in his voice and in his eyes silenced her. They were strange eyes—dark, yet containing glints of tawny fire.

One of the gang, who had crawled into the forward boot, shouted, "Here's the mail sack."

"Good enough!" answered Peso. "Let's get these horses unhitched."

A passenger cried out, "You're taking the stage horses? What becomes of us then?" He blanched as he saw the muzzle of a gun swing slowly toward him.

The man who liked to play with matches was fumbling at the knots lashing his kerosene can to his saddle. His muddy eyes held a fanatic gleam of pleasure, and his hands, palm-sweating, trembled eagerly. . . .

It was three days before business allowed Dave Fox to return to his freight headquarters in Caprock. Only then, did he learn the terrible news. Somewhere to the north of Cottonwood Station, the weekly stage-coach had been attacked and burned by unknown outlaws, the driver and all the passengers massacred in cold blood.

* * * * *

The lean-hipped man who wore the star-and-circle shield of the Rangers pinned to his shirt front was so tall in the saddle that on the ground he must tower over even the tallest of Texas men in that state of extraordinarily tall men. On this ride out from town which he was taking now, he had kept silent for the most part, letting his companions do the talking, asking only an occasional question.

His lean face, sun-and-wind darkened except for a surprising line of pallor just below the hairline which showed only when he tipped back his tall, broad-brimmed hat, held little expression beyond interest. But he was absorbing and cataloguing the information the other two were giving him.

That was plain in the narrowed intentness of his eyes, gray-green eyes that could express his thoughts better than words—when he so chose. For they could be as sunny as the summer skies or, when the green took over, as cold and chill as Arctic skies. They were neutral now, whenever his saddle companions glanced at him. But when he looked away, in

The Ranger fired twice and the man sagged against the dark wall

the eyes was a deep-seated anger as he listened to the harrowing tale of tragedy being unfolded for him.

This Ranger Jim Hatfield was not what could be called a handsome man, by any stretch of the imagination—his features were too craggy and rugged for that, his jaw too square and firm. But with his tall and lithely graceful body, he had a marked attractiveness—and he had a smile that was famous. It changed the whole expression of his face when it came, was like the sun breaking through dark clouds on a misty day.

He was not smiling now. His expression clearly said that somebody was going to pay for this awful thing he was hearing.

As the riders topped a slight dip in the land, the man riding on his right, big Matthew Wycoff, indicated the road ahead with a sweep of his arm.

"This is the place, Mr. Hatfield. It's always been a bad spot for the stages. You see those broken rocks hard above the road, where the attackers laid in wait? The driver on that run was an experienced man, but apparently they took him completely by surprise." He added, "There's the coach—or what little is left of it!"

THE Ranger only nodded, and the three of them rode forward, silent in the face of that tragedy which had occurred here and of which evidence still remained. Not dismounting, Jim Hatfield pulled up and studied the burned stage. It had taken kerosene to do as thorough a job as this, reducing the coach to a charred skeleton of blackened timbers. On its side, close to the rutted roadway,

the ruined hulk still stung the nostrils with a charred reek.

"Did they burn the bodies, too?" the Ranger asked bleakly.

"No, they left no one inside. The passengers were stood in a line and shot down, cold-bloodedly. You can see the evidence of that—yonder." Wycoff pointed out the spot. "The mail sack was taken, of course, and also the horses. What they couldn't use, they destroyed."

"Why?" demanded Hatfield. "To hurt the stageline, perhaps?"

Matthew Wycoff shrugged heavy shoulders. He was a solidly built man, of perhaps forty, and handsome in a florid, broad-jowled fashion. He seemed to know this and wore crisp sideburns, full, and a neatly trimmed spade beard. His clothes were expensive, his stitched half-boots kept to a high polish.

"You're asking me," he said heavily, "to admit that I have enemies. Well, I suppose I have. An outfit the size of Panhandle Freight naturally has small-fry rivals that would be glad to see it broken up. But on the other hand, this stageline is a new acquisition, and ownership hadn't yet changed hands at the time of the raid a week ago. Moreover, the coach was well-insured."

"But not the safety of the passengers," Hatfield pointed out quickly. "Or the hurt this could do to the line's reputation."

"That's right. And, of course, loss of the coach will automatically mean a rise in insurance rates. So if the idea was to strike at me, I suppose they picked a good way to do it!"

Hatfield said, "You tried to track the raiders?"

"Certainly! As soon as the news reached town my wagon boss, Claib Corum here, got up a posse and started scouring the country for sign. But you didn't have any luck, did you, Claib?"

The wagon boss drew Hatfield's look, saying harshly, "What could you expect? The soil of this Cap Rock country is thin, and the wind blows away sign before it's laid. We saw enough to figure there was maybe a half dozen in the raiding party, but we couldn't pick up trail. And," he added truculently, "I doubt any Ranger could have done better!"

"Likely not," Hatfield agreed, refusing to respond to the baiting. "I know the nature of this country."

His gray-green eyes met the belligerent stare mildly, and Claib Corum subsided, not having his challenge met. He was a fighter, plainly—a heavy-handed character, such as an enterprise the size of Wycoff's would need in a wagon boss. He had massive shoulders and arms, a bullet-shaped head, covered with a fur of cropped black hair and scarred with the marks of past battles.

"One more question," said Hatfield, turning again to Matt Wycoff. "What were you able to learn about the passengers?"

"Just enough to identify them, from the papers they carried. A pair of stockmen, and a drummer—all strangers hereabout. We've got word to their kin, where it was possible."

"I see." The Ranger nodded. "Well, thanks, gentlemen, for riding out with me and telling me what you could. I'm still believing my hunch is right—that this is the work of the outlaw I've been looking for. I had traced that man, Peso Vaught, into this country before I heard about the massacre.

"Killing off the passengers sounds a heap like Peso. He's a cold-blooded snake who'd rather leave a dead man than a live witness behind him. Folks say he got his nickname from bragging that a man's life means no more to him than a Mex dollar. The senseless burning of the coach, though—that's something I don't quite understand. Maybe he's picked up somebody in his crew who just naturally likes to watch things burn."

MATT WYCOFF shrugged, picking up his reins. "All I can say is, I hope you grab him—whoever did this. Anyway I can help, Hatfield, just let me know. I'll leave Claib with you, if you like."

"No." Hatfield shook his head. "I've taken enough of your time. I can manage."

Big Claib Corum spoke up, with half-concealed sarcasm. "Why, sure, Matt! Ain't you heard? This is the badge toter they call the Lone Wolf. He don't need help from anybody."

"I wouldn't say that, exactly," said the Ranger, and smiled. He gave no indication that he had to check a rush of temper. For some strange reason, this man seemed to be trying to needle him. But perhaps he, Hatfield, was only annoyed at the thought of anyone questioning his abilities as a manhunter.

Wycoff and his wagon boss rode away, northward again toward Caprock town. Then Hatfield dismounted from his fine golden sorrel, and turned his attention toward a closer examination of the torched stage and of the ground surrounding it.

CHAPTER III

A Wild, Strange Story

ALTOGETHER too many days had elapsed, however, since the holocaust, for Hatfield to discover anything. Constant wind had swept the earth bare of any clues that there might once have been. After several minutes of fruitless search, Jim Hatfield turned back to the sorrel and, taking the reins, said, "Well, Goldy! It looks like we were too late again. He's vamoosed, or I'm a heap mistook."

The elusive, vicious Peso Vaught had already led him over a large section of Texas, since his superior, Captain Bill McDowell, had assigned him the job of corralling the outlaw. He had followed a trail of victims north from the San Saba, doubling back toward Waco and the Trinity, swinging north again to Wichita Falls. Finally, after a period when all signs of activity by Vaught appeared to have ceased, a new clue had pointed him toward the Staken Plains, only a day or two before news of the shocking Caprock stage massacre had broken.

But once more, close though he had been, he was apparently too late. Again the trail played out here. It left him no choice but to resume hunting blindly until, perhaps, word came of further atrocities—or that Peso had passed clear out of Texas and was beyond his jurisdiction.

Tired, and more discouraged than he had been in a long time, Hatfield was about to reach for the stirrup when sight of a man coming toward him from the rocks above the stage road made him pause, waiting with narrow-eyed caution.

Mounted on a roan gelding, the fellow cantered straight toward him, lifting a hand in a peaceful greeting. He rode with shortened stirrups, Hatfield noticed —a stubby-legged, honest-looking chap of thirty or thereabouts. Suspicious of any motive that would have placed anyone in the concealment of those rocks, Jim Hatfield nevertheless stood his ground, waiting to learn what was wanted with him.

"Howdy," the man said, reining in. His tone and his expression were deadly serious, and quickly he went on: "I been hoping for a chance to talk with you, Ranger—and without Wycoff knowing. I hope you don't mind my following you from town?"

"I reckon that would depend," Hatfield answered cautiously.

The other man dismounted. On the ground he stacked up shorter than even average height, but there was an air of capability about him. Hatfield believed it would be easy to like this short-coupled, keen-eyed stranger.

"The name is Dave Fox," the man said. "I'm a shotgun freighter—I got a stock barn in Caprock. Strictly small-scale stuff, of course, compared with an outfit like Panhandle Freight."

"And what's your business with me?"

"Something I've got to tell you. Some-

thing I haven't dared mention to another soul, and that's been near driving me crazy!" And, standing there beside the charred timbers of the stage-coach, he related to Jim Hatfield a story that the Ranger heard out in astonishment.

"Let me get this straight!" Hatfield exclaimed, when Fox had finished. "You're saying it was this coach you saw that day, only a few hours before it ran into trouble? And a girl was aboard?"

"You've got to believe me!" the man pleaded. "Wherever she is now, if she isn't already dead, her life depends on it!"

Jim Hatfield answered quietly, "I didn't say I thought you were lying. But this is a plumb wild, strange story, you'll have to admit. If I understand you, you've kind of got a notion that Matt Wycoff was somehow mixed up in this holdup."

"How else does it figure, except that Wycoff wanted to eliminate the threat to his control of the partnership?"

"But you said he had offered to buy her out."

"Do you realize how much a half ownership in the Panhandle Freight and Cattle interests would amount to? A lot cheaper for him simply to have Ruth Bonniwell removed! And then, of course, the driver and the other passengers would have to be killed to cover up the fact that she had ever existed. She told me she had no close friends, no relatives, no one back East to try and trace her if she disappeared."

THE Ranger's eyes narrowed as he considered. "A serious charge, without evidence. Especially when there's mighty good reason to think Peso Vaught pulled this job—a man who kills without needing any reasons! Or he might have kidnaped the girl for reasons of his own that Matt Wycoff didn't have a thing to do with."

Dave Fox retorted, "Then explain this! Wycoff knew she was coming. He'd written to her to be sure and take this particular stage. Then why hasn't he said something? I checked at the hotel in Caprock. No reservation made there. Finally, when I mentioned something to Judge Himber, an old friend of Zack Bonniwell's, about how maybe Zack had left an heir, he said Wycoff had been trying to find out about that, but without any luck. What other proof can you need?"

"The law," Hatfield pointed out, "would need some proof besides your unsupported word that you actually saw this girl, and didn't invent her!"

Dave Fox's shoulders slumped. Utter weariness was in his stubborn face, and Jim Hatfield saw in that moment how harried and haunted this man was by the phantom of the missing girl.

"I know," Dave agreed leadenly. "That's the reason I've kept my mouth shut until I had a chance to talk to you. I was hoping I could make you believe me, and you'd be able to help."

"I can still be persuaded— What about the stageline books? Wouldn't there be a record, somewhere, of Ruth Bonniwell's purchasing a ticket?"

"I thought of that. But since Wycoff owns the line now, he's likely seen to having it quashed. The one man who could back up my story is Ed Smalley, who must have noticed her that day at Cottonwood Station. But Ed has already been replaced, and no way in the world of knowing where he might have drifted to."

"Just the same," said Hatfield, in quick decision, "we've got to try and locate him. Also, as you say, every move must be made in secret. For if the girl is alive, and Wycoff has her, a mistake on our part could stampede him into disposing of her— Wait a minute!"

Fox said quickly, "What is it?"

"An idea! An idea that may force this thing into the open!" Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, as his strategy shaped itself. "How far to the nearest telegraph key?"

"Close to forty miles."

The Ranger had already taken a notebook from a pocket, ripped out a sheet of paper. Leaning it against Goldy's saddle,

he penciled a hasty message, handed it over. "Could you get this sent, pronto?"

Fox read the message, his face showing bewilderment. "I don't see the point," he exclaimed. "But I'll have this on the wire by nightfall!"

"Good!" Hatfield turned and got the stirrup, lifted himself purposefully into saddle. "And I'm heading for Cottonwood Station. If there's any way to trace this girl, we'll find her. That's a promise!"

Of course, he had nothing to work on but the unsupported word of a stranger, a business rival of Wycoff's at that, who could be playing some deep game designed to hurt his competitor. Yet Jim Hatfield had a deep knowledge of men, and something told him Dave Fox's story, fantastic as it sounded, was too improbable to be contrived.

Maybe was wasting valuable time, that had better be spent picking up the lost thread of Peso Vaught's killer trail. But he could not afford to risk the chance that Fox was telling the truth, and that the mysterious girl named Ruth Bonniwell might even now be in danger of her life.

There was no movement about the stage station buildings, drowsing under the big cottonwood and the brassy sky, as Hatfield rode in along the stage trace.

WHILE he was still some distance away, however, a man came ambling out of the shadowed dog run and stood watching him—an unpromising, half-bald figure with a straggle of drooping sandy mustache, tobacco-stained at the fringes. His stare seemed mainly interested in the badge pinned to the Ranger's shirt front.

"Warm weather," remarked Hatfield, but got no answer.

He rode Goldy over to the watering trough and, dismounting, slipped the bit. While the sorrel drank, his rider looked about, sizing up the layout. The bald man stayed where he was, slowly scratching himself and following the Ranger's movements with sullen suspicion.

When Goldy was satisfied, Hatfield replaced the bit and led him over to the station building, where he dropped the lines to ground-anchor them. Then he walked into the larger section of the divided building, a single room with a makeshift bar and a table where meals could be served. Across the open dog run was the station tender's quarters and a storage room or two.

The bald-headed man had shuffled in after the Ranger. Suddenly Hatfield turned on him, with a sharp question: "Your name Smalley?"

The heavy-lidded eyes widened and a word was jarred out of the man. "Naw!"

"I been hearing a man named Ed Smalley was station tender here!"

"He ain't now. I only been here just under a week. Smalley was before me."

Jim Hatfield studied the man with a hard look, letting him think he did not believe his answer. "Where is he now?"

"Shucks, I dunno. Just took off. Never left no forwarding address." The mouth under the tobacco-stained mustache quirked with sarcasm.

"You'd better be telling me the truth!" Hatfield told him, icily. But he already had decided that this cross examination was getting him nowhere. He could not scare information out of a man who obviously knew nothing.

Then, on the verge of a protest, the bald-headed fellow's glance shot past Hatfield toward the other door, opening off the dog run. Clamping his jaw shut, he turned and abruptly left the room. At the same moment Hatfield heard the squeal of the screen door behind him and came about to face a gaunt, sharp-jowled man who had entered and stood just within the doorway, thumbs hooked in shell belt.

"What you want with my friend Smalley, Ranger?" he demanded.

Hatfield eyed him a moment coolly. "If you know his whereabouts, I'm advising you to tell me."

The man said, "I ain't selling no friend of mine to the law—not without I know first what he's wanted for." He crossed the dirt-floored room, lifted the drop-gate

in the bar and, going around behind, took a bottle and tin cup from a shelf and poured himself a slug of whisky. As he drained it off, Jim Hatfield moved over and put an elbow against the pine counter, watching the man carefully.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Let's stick to Smalley," said the lean-jawed man, unruffled by the question. He put down the cup, laid both hands on the edge of the bar, and looked at Hatfield directly with his obsidian-black eyes. "Tell me why the law wants him, and I might help you out."

"Maybe the law don't want him at all. Maybe I just want to deliver a message. Or ask him a few questions."

The other man considered this, while his eyes continued to probe Hatfield's. Then, deliberately, he took the bottle and filled his cup a second time.

"All I know is, Ed had him a Mex wife and some half-breed kids living in a plaza maybe five miles west of here. Could be they can tell you there where you'd best look for him."

It had the ring of a true answer, and the man eyed Hatfield squarely as he gave it. Though he still felt the strong prodding of a doubt, the Ranger decided it was best to keep this to himself. He nodded, slowly.

"It might be worth looking into. Thanks."

CHAPTER IV

The Grave

HATFIELD went out of the building. He got Goldy's reins, was about to mount when he saw the station tender hobbling up from the feed barn. Hatfield waited until he was in talking distance, then indicated the station building with a nod of his head.

"Who's your friend?"

The tender seemed to hesitate a fraction of an instant over his answer. "Crowder?" he said then, and shrugged humped shoulders. "Just an hombre that hangs around the station—helps out now and then, handling the stock. I inherited him from Smalley."

Hatfield nodded curtly, and swung into saddle. He rode off westward, leaving the station man standing there.

The whole thing had a peculiar ring to it. The man called Crowder did not look like the ordinary booze-hound apt to be hanging out at a stage station barn for what odd jobs he could pick up. It was strange, too, that Dave Fox hadn't mentioned him as a possible source of information about the missing Ed Smalley. But these were no more than vague suspicionings, and though they caused doubt as to the truth of the tip Crowder had given him Hatfield had no choice but to act on it.

And, in fact, he found the plaza just as it had been described—a squalid huddle of 'dobe structures, hugging a muddy branch crossing. There were a few sheep pens, an acre or two of bottomland under primitive cultivation. It was a poverty-stricken place.

He rode down through the willows and cottonwoods that lined the bank, following a dim trail toward the hovels. A bent old man in ragged cotton garments was hacking at the ground with a hoe. When Hatfield stopped to speak to him he turned up a face that was as dry as crumpled parchment, and eyes that held no understanding.

At mention of the name of Ed Smalley, the Ranger was certain he caught a startled flicker in the smoky depths of those eyes; but they clouded quickly and the old Mexican gave no sign of an answer. Hatfield repeated the question, in Spanish, and still there was no response. A little angered, he rode on toward the nearest house.

This was a humble *casa,* with a flat stone from the stream bed to serve as doorsill, and a roof of brush. But the woman who stood in the doorway watching him approach was young and still retained something of her looks, and her

dress was a garment that looked as though it might have come out of a mail order catalogue. The skin of the naked child playing in the dirt was a shade lighter than the woman's.

Jim Hatfield dismounted, touching hat brim respectfully. Again he spoke the name of Edward Smalley—and at once saw terror leap into the woman's startled eyes.

"It's a business matter," he assured her quickly. "I don't mean him any harm. I was told I'd find him here."

Swiftly she stooped, snatched up the child. Without a word she vanished into the dark interior. Hatfield started to call after her, held his tongue. He looked about with narrowed eyes, discovered that every living person had disappeared from the river bank. The old man's hoe lay where he had dropped it.

Baffled, the Ranger turned back to his horse. He had gathered up the reins and was standing with a hand on the horn, undecided, when a voice spoke softly: "Senor?"

In the shadow at the corner of the house stood a lad whose skin was nearly white, but whose coarse black hair and smoky eyes clearly proclaimed his race. Catching Hatfield's eye the boy jerked his head, in a summons, and turned quickly away. And something led the Ranger to follow, trailing Goldy's reins.

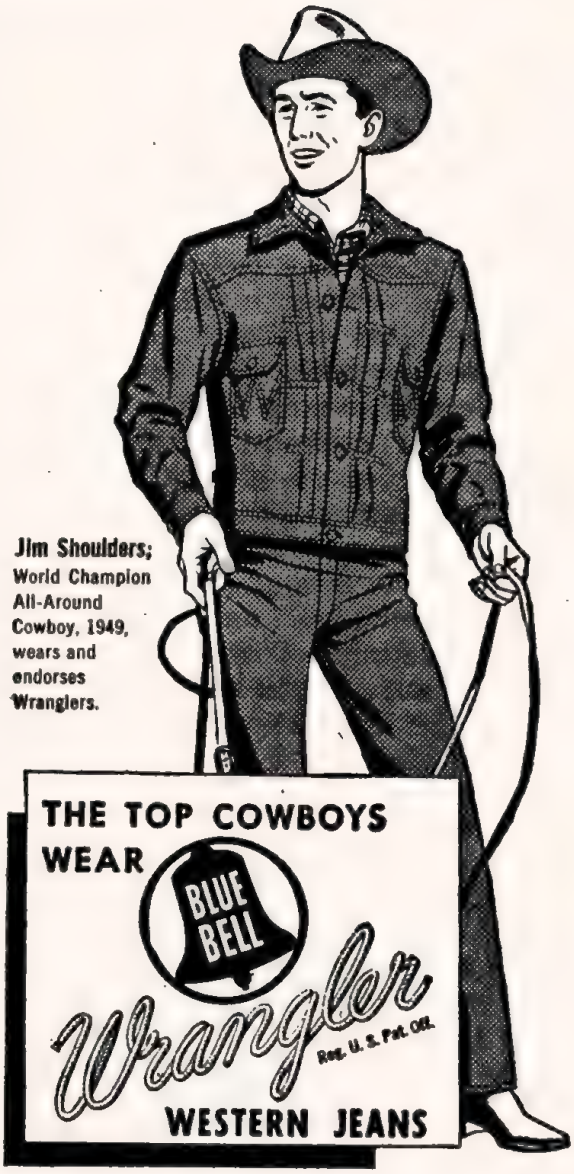
On silent bare feet, the half-breed lad took him up a dim path into the overgrowth of brush and trees that lined the shallow bank above the river. Somehow, Jim Hatfield had already guessed what he was to find, even before the boy halted, waiting for him, and as he came up pointed silently to a fresh and barren mound of earth with a crude cross affixed at its head.

SLOWLY, Jim Hatfield lifted a hand to pull off his Stetson.

"When did it happen?" he demanded.

"A week since, senor. Three white men rode in asking for him, and shot him as he stood in the door."

[*Turn page*]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"He was your father?"

"*Si.*" The lad's fortitude was pathetic. His mouth, held firmly straight, was beginning suddenly to tremble at the corners. "I helped bury him."

Bleakly, the Ranger muttered, "No wonder they were afraid of a white man, and wouldn't speak to me." And his eyes were all green ice at that moment.

"He died without a priest," the boy said, and blind grief was in his words. "And we are poor. We cannot afford even a candle to burn for him."

A gunshot smashed the stillness, there under the trees. A gout of dirt sprang from the mound at Hatfield's feet. With a quick movement of his arm he swept the boy out of danger, at the same time dropping to one knee and making a stabbing reach for gun butt.

He had not seen the flash of that other weapon, but his sharp eye picked up a smear of black powdersmoke, dissolving, and he targeted this, putting over a quick bullet that clipped splintered bark from the edge of a thick cottonwood. There was movement there, as someone ducked wildly. Then a man poked head and shoulder into view as he flung a second shot. It came so close Hatfield almost felt it burn past.

Behind him, Goldy snorted in fear. The Ranger calmly triggered back, his gun already leveled. As his finger crimped the trigger, the ambusher screamed and was hurled violently aside. His hand clutched at the tree and he pivoted about it as he fell, face-downward, crashing in the brush that choked its base.

Hatfield gave the half-breed lad a quick glance, ascertaining that he had not been hurt by wild lead. Then, with smoking gun still ready, he hurried forward, to seize the body and turn it face up. The man was dead, completely, and there was no sign of further ambushers. Hatfield sheathed the Colt, to make a quick search of the body, but turned up no identification.

Grimly he said, "Do you recognize him? Was he one of the men who killed your father?"

The boy touched tongue to ashen lips, terror in the look he gave the dead man. But he shook his head. "They were masked, senor. Only one would I remember, because of his eyes."

"What about 'em?"

"They were strange eyes, senor. Very black, but there were lights of fire in them, too."

From a pocket, Hatfield quickly drew a silver coin and handed it to the boy. "Here—to burn a candle for your father. And get somebody to take care of this one, will you?"

Before the lad could stammer a reply the Ranger was already hurrying to his sorrel, finding stirrup and lifting astride. Spurred by a truth that he now recognized, he cursed the time it took to cover the distance to Cottonwood Station.

He did not slacken speed when the buildings of the station came in sight across the dancing heat-waves, though for all he knew he might expect lead to leap at him from any window, or the dark interior of the barn. He was not challenged at all, however; and to him this indicated that he was already too late.

Nevertheless, a gun was in his hand as he hauled Goldy to a dust-gouging stop, leaped down and headed directly for the main room of the station. A glance showed him that it was empty. He went on through, stormed across the dog run into the smaller section of the building. The station tender's room was empty. Turning back, he saw a second door ajar and kicked it open, revealing a small and untidy storeroom.

He caught breath with a start. On the mud floor, in one corner, was a heap of blankets, and beside it a pitcher and a tin plate that held the remnants of food. On the blankets were ropes that had been hastily slashed with a knife blade.

A FOOTSTEP out in the dog run pulled Hatfield around just as the bald-headed tender shuffled into view, his jaw sagging under the tobacco-stained mustache, his face a sickly color as he saw the thunder in Hatfield's glare, the

gun tight in hard fingers.

"Where are they?" demanded Hatfield furiously.

The man faltered. "Who?"

"Peso Vaught—and the girl he was holding prisoner here."

"Girl?" The man swallowed a couple of times. "I—I dunno anything, mister!"

Almost beside himself, Hatfield grabbed a handful of the man's shirtfront, slammed him hard against an edge of the storeroom door. "You see that?" he gritted, stabbing a hard finger at the incriminating evidence within. "Peso Vaught, the man you called Crowder, was holding a girl locked in that room. When I came snooping, he put me on a false trail to find a man he had already killed, and sent one of his gang to try and kill me, too, while he took the girl and cleared out for some other hideout. You willing to tell me everything you know—or would you rather be held as an accomplice?"

At that, the man broke down. "I didn't know—honest! They were here when I come and took over the station a week ago. Promised to kill me if I snooped around this wing of the building. I didn't know what they were up to, or what they had in that storeroom. I—I didn't dare ask no questions."

"Maybe," Hatfield suggested icily, "you were warned that if you wanted to hold this job you'd best keep your mouth shut and your head turned the other way?"

The man blinked, shook his head foolishly. "Dunno what you mean. I was scared of Crowder, that's all. I didn't know he was Peso Vaught, like you say."

Hatfield was cursing himself for not having known that himself the moment he had laid eyes on "Crowder." But he had never seen Peso Vaught before in his life and, oddly enough, there were no pictures in existence—not even a tintype—to go with the man's wanted poster description. In that description, only the eyes were stressed—strange black eyes with tawny flecks. Hatfield could remember those tawny flecks now—now that it was too late. Whatever had possessed him not to have recognized the outlaw at once?

Suddenly, the Ranger knew that the tender was telling the truth, and that there was no more to be had out of him. At least Hatfield was certain, now, that the story Dave Fox had told him was a true one.

He dragged a deep breath into his lungs, released his hold on the frightened prisoner. "How many in the gang?" he asked wearily.

"Four, altogether. They were all in the feed barn, with their horses, when you first rode here a while ago. I knew they'd left right after you, but I didn't see 'em go. They warned me not to watch which direction they rode, but it sounded like they was heading west." He pointed a trembling arm.

"All right—I believe you. I'll let you go. But don't say a word of this to anybody, or they might decide to come back and give you what they gave Ed Smalley. You savvy?"

"Yeah—yeah!"

And, knowing the frightened man's lips were sealed by this warning, Jim Hatfield heeled about and went outside to snatch Goldy's reins and lift himself into the leather.

CHAPTER V

Overheard

CAPROCK, like so many towns on the high Staked Plains, was largely a scatter of 'dobe buildings along a single wide, meandering main street, lined with mesquite pole arcades. One end of this street was dominated by the wagon yard, offices, and storehouses belonging to the great Panhandle Freight Company; at the other stood the newer and much more modest layout of Dave Fox.

A stage line terminal, Caprock was also the natural center from which the big freight wagons fanned out to serve the

ranches, the lonely stations, and the new towns springing up here and there across the Panhandle.

In a Mexican eating house, Jim Hatfield and Dave Fox had a meal of highly-spiced tortillas, while dusk flowed across the wide land. Both men were dusty and saddle-stained, each intently concerned with the other's information. Hatfield's story took the longest in the telling as he informed Dave of his discovery at Cottonwood Station, and of the ambush try across Ed Smalley's lonely grave.

"So they killed him!" Fox exclaimed bleakly, his hands doubling into fists. "As friendly a gent as Ed!"

"And they had Ruth Bonniwell there at the station, right under my nose, all the time I was talking to the new man and to Peso Vaught."

"You're sure it was Vaught, himself? The one who sent you to Smalley's?"

Hatfield nodded. "I'd wager it! Though as I told you, I'd never seen the man before, or even a picture of him. To think of all the miles I've chased that outlaw, and then I stood as close to him as I am to you right this minute, and didn't know it!" His face was grim, its planes hardened by his thoughts. "The little boy said he was masked when he killed Smalley, but behind a mask, or anywhere, I know I'll never again mistake those eyes, now that I've seen them!"

Fox's own report was briefer. "I got your message to the telegraph station, and waited to see it put on the wire."

"Good!" said Hatfield. "It's a card I won't need to play, but I'll maybe want it for a showdown."

When finally they parted in front of the eat shack, Fox said, "I've had little rest, these last weeks, from worrying. Now that I at least know the girl is alive, maybe I can take it a little easier. I hope so! I'm taking a wagonload of merchandise to Maury Logan's, up in Tascosa tomorrow, early."

"A man sure needs his rest," Hatfield told him. "Plain worrying don't get you anything."

For his own part, however, he could not be satisfied with what he had accomplished so far. He leaned his shoulders against the rough adobe of a building front and smoked a quirly, as he studied the quiet darkness of the dusty street and thought ahead into this tangled problem. The plight of the missing girl was a spur that kept him hunting for a solution.

When the butt was smoked down, pinched out, and rubbed into the dust beneath his boot, the Ranger pushed away from the wall and moved silently up the street toward the Panhandle Freight yard, an idea working inside him.

The yard behind the high fence, the big barn and warehouse were dark bulks against the stars. From across the street Hatfield studied the layout. Then, seeing no one moving about, he cut quickly across the shadowed dust. Knowing it would be securely locked he did not try the office doorway, under the huge "PANHANDLE FREIGHT" sign, but instead cut around the corner of the building where shadows lay dense. Here, a window glimmered faintly in starlight. And, as he had hoped, he found it poorly set into the adobe, and warped so that it would not lock.

By silent probing he got this eased open enough to crawl through. He stood a moment in utter blackness, getting his bearings. The darkness was too complete for his eyes to adjust; after a second's hesitation, he risked snapping a match and shielding it as he took a brief survey of the room.

There were desks, chairs, a bank of file cabinets. He was about to start for those files when he sighted a door in the opposite wall and saw Matthew Wycoff's name painted on it. This, he thought, was probably what he wanted. He put out the match, felt his way across to the door and found the latch. It lifted under his hand. He slipped through into a smaller, musty private office.

A SECOND match showed him the furnishings, a closet in one corner, a single window with a shade. Closing the door, he crossed to the window and

drew the shade. Then, deciding the risk was worth taking, he found and lit the lamp in a wall bracket. With the door shut, it would not be seen from the street. He drew one of his twin Colts, laying it on the desk where it would be in reach. Then, quickly and silently, he began to pull out the drawers one by one.

It was a definite thing he was searching for, though he admitted the chances for finding it were not good. Wycoff would undoubtedly keep it well-hidden, and not necessarily here in his office desk. Still, Hatfield made a thorough search, his questing hands moving with quick sureness that missed nothing, and left the papers exactly as he had found them, and undisturbed. No one would suspect that the desk had been ransacked.

But apparently his hunch was a poor one. He straightened from the last drawer, empty-handed. He started to knee it shut, as he looked about him without much hope for another inspiration. Then, instead, he opened the drawer again and took out a box of expensive, Eastern-made cheroots.

He never knew just what it was that made him lift a handful of the cigars out of the box but, at the bottom, concealed by the slim tubes of tobacco, was the packet of papers he wanted. The fact that they had been so cleverly hidden identified them, even before he thumbed through for a hasty look at their contents.

Grimly exultant, Hatfield pocketed them. He smoothed out the level of cheroots in the box, replaced it, and closed the drawer. Stowing the packet away in his clothing, he picked up his gun from the desk and turned to blow out the lamp. He was like that, hand cupped above the chimney, when he heard the door of the outer office swing open, and boots strike the floor boards.

He blew out the lamp, and as darkness rushed in upon the room stood for an instant, gun ready, taking quick measure of his predicament.

It was already too late to think of reaching the window, raising the shade and sash. The men—two of them, he thought—were coming directly across the outer office with the assurance of men at home enough to find their way easily in the dark. For an instant Hatfield thought of that other window, standing wide open. He wondered what would happen if they should discover it.

But though escape was impossible, another door was opposite, and Hatfield felt his way toward it, slipped into a cubby-hole of a closet. He pulled the door closed, keeping his hand on it and his six-gun leveled, just as the other door swung open and Matt Wycoff's voice said, "Get the lamp going, Claib."

Jim Hatfield held his breath. The lamp chimney would be warm to the touch, a clear warning. But Claib Corum's hands were horny with callus and his mind was on other matters. There was the clink of the chimney, the springing to life of a glow that filtered through the crack beneath the closet door. The swivel desk chair creaked as Matt Wycoff dropped into it.

"Well, go ahead and blow out that damn match!" Wycoff growled testily. "If I don't watch you, you're going to burn up the place for me some of these days!"

Corum grumbled something, but he didn't argue. He said, instead, "What you got on your mind, Chief? What's so important that couldn't be talked over in a saloon?"

"Fool! You want everybody to hear our talk? This is the only really safe place in town." He went on, getting quickly down to business. "It's about Dave Fox. He's taking a wagon up to Tascosa, in the morning; just him, and a swamper. It looks like our opportunity, and I want you to see to it—but take no chances."

"Not likely! And what about the Ranger?"

"Hatfield? How do you mean, what about him?"

"Malone says he saw him and Fox together, this evening, in one of them chili joints down the street."

"The devil he did!" exclaimed Wycoff.

THERE was a moment's silence, as he appeared to be considering this news. The listening man heard a desk drawer scrape open.

"What business," Matt Wycoff demanded in a worried voice, "could those two have, anyway?" The next instant, however, he seemed to dismiss the subject. "Well, it likely doesn't mean anything, and I figure Hatfield won't be staying around this country much longer—About tomorrow, now. I reckon you know what to do?" These last words were spaced apart, as a man's talk is when he puffs a cigar or a pipe alight while speaking.

"Sure—leave it to me!" the wagon boss said, and added, "Why don't you ever let me try one of them fancy cheroots, Matt? They smell like they taste good!"

"One of these, Claib?" Jim Hatfield felt the sharp bunching of nerves, tensed against the moment of Wycoff's discovery that something was wrong with that box of cigars. But instead he heard the freighter m e r e l y laugh, sneeringly. "They're too expensive for your breed, Claib. They'd just be wasted on you."

The drawer was pushed shut. The swivel chair creaked again, as Wycoff pushed to his feet.

"You've got your orders. Fox is the main obstacle, now, and I aim to be rid of him. He's got a toehold at Tascosa, with the Logan contract. That's got to stop."

"Logan?" repeated the wagon boss scornfully. "I can take care of him, too. There's one treatment always works with these yellow-bellied storekeepers!"

Wycoff said, "Well, maybe. Get rid of Fox, and the storekeepers will take care of themselves."

The lamp was extinguished. The heavy tramp of boots crossed the floor and went out into the outer office. Jim Hatfield cracked the closet door open, letting fresher air into his stuffy hiding place as he listened. When he heard the street door slam and silence descend again, he slipped quickly out.

Hand on holstered gun butt, face a stiff mask in the darkness, he considered what he had heard. He had hoped for some mention of Ruth Bonniwell, but the news he did have should prove most interesting listening for Dave Fox.

It was a matter of seconds for him to slip out through the silent offices and across the sill of the window through which he had entered. He lowered it carefully, waited a moment as he keened the silence for any danger of a witness.

Finding the coast clear, he faded quickly into the shadows. . . .

At gray dawn, Hatfield and Dave Fox joined two men who had been secretly summoned to the wagon yard at the lower end of the street. These were reliable men, screened and chosen by Fox. They had brought weapons, and in the chill half light their faces were serious as they listened to Dave's explanation.

"It was Hatfield's idea," he told them, "for me to call you in on this. He's found out some kind of dirty work is planned for today, on the trail between here and Tascosa. It seems to be aimed at me, and personally I'd rather look out for my own hide. If you don't want to mix into it, just say so."

A big, red-headed teamster named O'Fallon said, "Let's get one thing straight. Is it Matt Wycoff, and that half-crazy Claib Corum that's behind this? I quit Panhandle Freight after old Zack died, because I couldn't stand working for that pair. Wycoff's getting too damn big for his boots since he took over—and I'd like the chance to help clip him down a little!"

Jim Hatfield said, "It's Wycoff, all right. And Corum, following out his orders. We don't know what the plan is, but I'm pretty sure they're aiming to kill Dave and the swamper on the wagon with him. Corum will likely bring help enough to make sure of no slip ups. That's why I figure we better have a reserve, ourselves, to give 'em a surprise they won't be looking for. I'll ride the wagon, as swamper. Dave and I, together, will take the main risk. You two will be in the box, under canvas. I reckon you'll know

right enough when and if you're needed. Is that agreeable?"

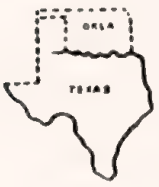
The second man grunted, "Plenty!"

"One other thing," Hatfield went on. "You probably wonder why, knowing all this, I as a Ranger can't move directly against Wycoff and Corum and put a stop to their crookedness. You'll have to take my word for it that I can't! A life depends on my being plumb careful."

It would not do to mention Ruth Bonniwell. Even with men as loyal as these there could be a leak, and word might get back to Wycoff. Sooner or later—perhaps from the agent at Cottonwood Station—the Panhandle Freight boss was bound to learn that Hatfield knew of the missing girl. But as long as Wycoff thought this was his own black secret, Ruth's chances of staying alive remained by just that much the better.

LONG-SHOT JONES

A Tall Texas Tale



THE old West produced a lot of fancy gunmen who could shoot the spots out of playing cards, drive nailheads into the wall, flutter candle flames without snuffing out the candles, and so forth. But for pure distance shooting there probably never was anyone who could stand in the same pea patch with Long-Shot Jones.

The first time anybody ever saw him pull his prize trick was one hot day when old Jug Spieler had all the best shots he knew out to his Lazy S for a deer shoot. Game was scarce that day, however, and there hadn't been a shot fired when the party camped for the noon meal and Long-Shot Jones suddenly pulls up his rifle and sights off toward the distant horizon.

"Hey!" Shaggy Parnham hollered. "You gone loco, or have you just got better eyes than me? I don't see nothing but grass off thataway."

"There's a ten-point buck a grazing off yonder," says Long-Shot, stepping over to the fire and dropping some of the cooking salt down the barrel before raising his rifle again.

"What's the salt for?" Jug Spieler asks, curious.

"That buck's quite a piece a way," Long-Shot explained. "Maybe a day, two day's ride. And hot as it is and all, I sure don't want that meat to spoil 'fore I can get to it."

CHAPTER VI

Water-Hole Fight

WHEN the canvas-topped wagon loaded with groceries and other freight for the Tascosa market rolled out of the wagon yard, an hour past sunup, Fox's two men were packed in an open space which had been left behind the seat. It was stifling under there, with the sun gathering strength against the canvas wagon cover, but they sweated through this cheerfully, swapping jokes with a carelessness that attempted to mask the rising tension of waiting for the unknown.

Jim Hatfield, on the seat beside Dave Fox with his star-and-circle badge removed so that it would not reflect a smear of sunlight and perhaps too soon betray his identity, kept a narrow attention on all the surrounding stretch of empty plains. The morning slipped away, the chuck-holes of the Tascosa trail jounced the heavy wheels, but still there was no sign of what awaited them.

Hatfield and the freighter had already discussed the scene in Wycoff's office, but they went over it again. Fox wanted to know, "What happens if Matt starts hunting for that stuff cached in the cigar box, and finds it gone?"

"I don't know. I hope it doesn't happen. When he does learn about it, it's going to come as an unpleasant shock, and I want to be the one to pull it on him, so I can watch his face!"

"You didn't hear anything to make you think they'd had word from Vaught, or knew you'd been asking questions?"

"No, looks like Vaught hadn't got in touch with them yet, from what they said."

"Sooner or later, though," Fox insisted, "there should be some contact made. If we could just keep a close eye on every move Wycoff makes—"

Hatfield shook his head. "Who knows how long that might take? Wycoff is a slick customer. I got a notion we could watch him twenty-four hours a day, without finding out how he keeps in touch with Vaught's gang!"

They rode on, into the wind and the dust and the heat of this cap rock region. It was a dry haul from Caprock to Tascosa, the sole watering point being in the depression of a buffalo wallow half-way between the two towns. Somehow, as the hours dragged uneventfully past, Jim Hatfield became convinced that whatever was to happen would take place at this remote and isolated place.

He knew this for a certainty when, coming in sight of the water-hole, they picked out through smearing heat haze the dark shape of a wagon already standing idle nearby.

"A Wycoff rig," Dave Fox remarked, when they were close enough to make it out clearly.

The Ranger nodded grimly and, turning, spoke to the sweating men hidden within the wagon. "Keep your guns ready," he warned. "I think this is going to be it!" He pulled his hat down to cover his face, watching the other outfit carefully from below the brim as they rolled nearer.

It looked peaceable enough—a big freight wagon drawn up at one side, the mules still on the chain and cropping at the scant graze. There were no men in sight, but Hatfield noticed with careful interest the outcrop that broke the surface of the plain above the hollow. This, or the wagon itself, could conceal waiting men and guns.

Then they were pulling up to the other wagon, and a man stepped into sight around the end of it—a tough, unshaven figure, with a mean look of wanting trouble. He did not carry a gun, but there was one strapped handy against his leg.

He said harshly, "Just keep your outfit rolling, friend!"

"This *is* it," Hatfield muttered. "Play up to him. Let's see how they've got it planned."

Fox nodded. To the tough he said, "What do you mean, Grady? Here is where I water."

"Not this time, it ain't! We're using it! We're using all of it. So—roll!"

"Why, cuss you!" the little freighter shouted. "You can't hog water that every man needs!"

"Think not?" Grady spread his elbows, big hands curling into fists. "If you want to see what I can or can't do, just step down here—you runt!"

THAT was a fighting word that Dave Fox could not have taken off any man. With a reckless yell he came leaping down from the wagon, charging straight at the tormentor. That Grady topped him by a head was not a fact to stop a banty scrapper like Dave Fox. Grady knew this, and he met the rush with a bellow of fake rage that turned into a surprised grunt as Fox got in the first swinging blow.

A glint of reflected sunlight tore Hatfield's glance from the fighting pair, then. Swinging his head, he caught sight of the dark shape that stepped into view at the edge of the outcropping. A rifle in his hands sent back a liquid smear of brightness as it came up to his shoulder. The barrel lifted to point at Hatfield who was still on the seat of the wagon.

Without hesitation, the Ranger drew and fired—a quick, smooth blur of motion. His bullet chipped dust from the outcrop and that was too close for the rifleman. He was already ducking for cover behind the rock shield, in such haste that he did not try to complete his shot. Hatfield threw a second bullet after his retreating shape. Then, in motion, he

was swinging his long length down to the earth.

Dave Fox and the tough, Grady, were tangled in a fight of real fury, though considering the difference in their sizes, there could not be much doubt as to its outcome. Even as the Ranger glanced their way, he saw the smaller man take a solid clout that tore through his defenses and landed solidly against the side of his head. Fox stumbled back, driven by the sheer weight of it. Grady gave a roar of triumph and followed in, arms pistoning. Under this punishment, the shorter man suddenly went down.

He was fighting back to hands and knees when Grady charged, a cowhide boot lifting to deliver a punishing, murderous kick against the side of the head.

That was when Hatfield got to him.

Gun back into holster to leave both hands free, the Ranger took Grady by the shoulder, checking his rush and almost throwing him as he was pulled around in mid-stride. Hatfield's right fist exploded into the man's beard-stubbled face; his left sank deep into the tough's mid-section, and another right jab straightened him as he started to fold. Grady went back with mincing steps and dropped.

Dave Fox was on his feet again, now. His cry of warning pulled Hatfield around, on the alert.

From wherever they had hidden—behind the parked wagon, or in cover of the outcrop—three more Panhandle Freight toughs were converging on him in a silent rush. Hatfield whirled to meet them. They had orders, apparently, to do this job with the brute force of fists, leaving any gunplay to the rifleman who was still hidden in the rocks.

Hatfield sent one man reeling, took a tooth-rattling clout that jarred him and put him off-balance for an instant. He managed to twist clear of the finishing blow meant to follow it up, but the third man fell upon him with a weight that carried him hard to the earth.

A hand seized that weight and lifted it clear off him and, rolling, he saw big O'Fallon smash a fist into the tough's face and send him staggering, arms pinwheeling. The men from Dave Fox's wagon had joined the fray, and now Fox himself was leaping back into it. Hatfield came to his feet, his own thoughts filled with another danger—that rifleman, back in the outcrop.

Leaving the others to handle this fight, he started for the place where he had seen the man disappear.

A stinging shot greeted him, with its direct nearness making him hit the dirt. As kicked-up dust cleared, he had his six-shooter again and he punched out two shots. Then he was on his feet and plunging forward, weaving as he came in to the hidden rifle. He made slight cover, flopped behind it and lay a moment, eyeing that shielding outcrop and waiting to draw fire, his six-gun ready for the briefest of targets. But seconds dragged out and none came.

Then, against the background of racket from the mêlée at the wagons, there came the sudden sound of a horse spurred to quick gallop. At once Hatfield was up again, darting forward. He rounded the screen of outcrop, and saw a rider spurring away across the heat-shimmering plain, bent forward in the saddle to urge more speed from his horse. Hatfield's six-gun lifted, then slowly he let it drop again. The man was already gone past hope of stipping him.

He turned back.

AT THE water-hole, the fight had ended. Grady and another man were stretched out senseless. The remaining pair of toughs had subsided in defeat, and were awaiting their fate sullenly. There were black eyes and bloody noses, but neither Dave Fox nor his two helpers had been badly hurt in the mixup.

"The other one got away?" Fox asked, seeing Hatfield return empty-handed. "Who was it?"

"It looked like Corum. He had a bronc saddled and waiting, so there was no chance of holding him. I guess he intended to direct the thing without mixing

in it directly, unless to throw in a bullet or two if needed. It was to be an ordinary free-for-all, with the two of us getting killed in the process." He turned to the prisoners. "That about it?"

One muttered, "We don't know nothing."

O'Fallon lifted a clubbed fist threateningly. "Talk, damn you, or—."

Dave Fox, mopping sweat from his bruised face, shook his head. "Let it go," he said. "These men are tough. It won't do us any good to kill them, trying to get a confession."

"He's right," Hatfield said. "Let them pile their hurt friends into that wagon yonder. You two can take them with you back to Caprock. I doubt that we'll be needing you any further."

Their own team watered and rested, Hatfield and Dave Fox rolled north heading once more for Tascosa, satified by the knowledge that Wycoff had lost this round and lost it badly.

Tascosa, on the north side of the rich canadian valley, was at the height of its boom as trade center for the northern Panhandle cattle ranges. More homes and business houses were going up regularly; sound of saw and hammer was loud in the stir of activity along the wide streets that stretched back from the canadian's boggy crossing.

To have captured for himself the account with Maury Logan's mercantile here, had been a real feather in Dave Fox's cap. It was understandable that Matt Wycoff should be keenly interested in taking it away from him.

"Our contract is up for renewal," Dave told the Ranger as they brought the big freight rig up to the store's pile-raised loading platform. "It makes me plumb uneasy that Wycoff don't pull some trick or other to persuade him not to sign. Maury ain't the nerviest of men, and it might not be too hard to scare him."

"Then take a look," the Ranger said grimly. "That bronc tied in front of the store. Unless I'm wrong it's the same one our rifleman was forking when he high-tailed away from that water-hole ruckus."

Fox said nothing. But Hatfield had never seen a grimmer, more determined look than was on the face of the diminutive freighter as he swung down from the high seat. Jim Hatfield followed him up the steps to the loading platform, not knowing what might be about to happen.

A clerk wearing sleeveholders came out through the loading doors and Fox told him, "Get your men to work unloading that stuff, will you, Pete? I got business to talk over with your boss."

"Maury's inside," the clerk told him.

CHAPTER VII

Firebug Threat

INSIDE the storeroom that held the good odors of a cowtown mercantile—the fresh bolt goods, the leather and rubber smells, the pleasant savor of barrel molasses, it was a busy place. Leaning against a counter talking to the reedy, gray-haired merchant, was big Claib Corum. When he sighted Fox and Hatfield, he straightened slowly and a look that had pure murder washed across his ugly, battered face.

"Hello, Corum," said Fox, his voice carefully controlled.

The wagon boss only looked at him. Then his stare moved to the Ranger's face and he seemed to be trying to read Hatfield. The fact that the lawman appeared to have openly allied himself with this rival freighter was a thing that plainly had him worried. He said nothing at all, merely scowling as the two approached the counter.

"I've got that contract renewal ready," Fox told the storekeeper. He removed a paper from his pocket and laid it on the wood. "All it needs is your signature. Same terms, same rates as the original agreement."

Maury Logan picked up the paper, his face worried. "Well, I'll tell you," he said hesitantly. "These rates—"

"What's wrong with them? They're fair."

"Yes, I suppose so. But I can get cheaper." He slid a nervous sidelong glance toward Claib Corum, one that completely gave away the direction of his thoughts.

Dave Fox's face went hard. "So I'm being underbid? Maury, I can't stop you if you want to switch your trade. But you're a business man, and I want you to ask yourself just one question: Can any freighter — I don't care who he is — actually charge lower rates than I have, and stay in operation? Suppose he takes all my business away from me by cutting prices, drives out every other competition —then what will happen? How long do you think it will be before he hikes his rates up to levels you never heard of before—and holds them there!"

His argument had its apparent effect. Maury Logan, scowling at the paper in his hand, ran fingers through his thinning hair. "Yeah, I've never said your rates weren't reasonable. Still, I dunno—"

Claib Corum's craggy face was thunderous, as he saw his propaganda being undermined by Fox's straight talk. He dug out a coin from his pocket, slapped it onto the counter. "Got a box of matches?" he demanded.

"Sure." The storekeeper turned and took one off a pile of them on a shelf. Corum fished out a stick, scraped it sharply alight. He watched the flame grow as he fed it by tilting the match, the gleam reflected in his eager stare.

He said, slowly, "I hope you're plumb careful with fires, Logan. If this store of yours once started burning, there'd be nothing left of it at all—especially if a match got into them tins of kerosene out in the storeroom. It would make a real pretty blaze, too—while it lasted!"

Deliberately he let the burning match stick drop to the floor, let it burn there for an instant before he set his boot on it, despite the squawk of protest that bubbled up in the storekeeper's throat. "I'm not worried about you, though, Maury," he went on then. "You're a cautious man. You know better than to run unnecessary risks. You can be depended on to do the sensible thing."

Jim Hatfield glanced at the storekeeper, saw that his face had gone white with fear, and with his understanding of the threat that lay behind the wagon boss' cryptic words. Maury Logan dropped the unsigned paper to the counter, started to shove it back toward Dave Fox with a frightened shake of the head.

Anger built up in Hatfield. "One other reason," he clipped, "why you want to sign with Fox, Logan! As of this minute, there's a new clause in his contracts—a provision I'm putting in myself. It's a guarantee protecting all shipments from ravages of certain types of vermin, including firebugs!" He swung his sharp stare to meet Claib Corum's, squarely. "It's a breed I can't stomach," he murmured quietly. "Any I see, I stamp out. And I give my personal guarantee that none will harm this store or its contents!"

"I—see." Maury Logan, pale as death, could hardly stammer out the words.

DAVE FOX, motionless was staring at Hatfield and at the Wycoff man as though not trusting his senses or daring to guess what would happen next. The Ranger, for his part, merely waited with arms hanging at his sides, near the butts of strapped-down matched six-guns.

There was no doubt that Corum read the full meaning of his speech. Bullethead thrust forward, ugly features working under the pull of mingled emotions, he seemed to be trying for words but not finding them. If it had been any other man than Jim Hatfield who faced him, chances were there would have been a break of violence then and there. But respect for the Lone Wolf's reputation—and, perhaps, thought of that scene at the water-hole when accurately-placed bullets from the Ranger's six-gun had driven him off, despite all the advantage of cover and a saddle-gun—held Calib Corum in check.

When he turned, suddenly, and went striding out of that building without a

word or a backward look, it was an unmistakable gesture of defeat. For the moment.

"He backed down!" cried Dave Fox. "He swallowed it, and never said a word. You bluffed him clear out, Jim!"

"It was no bluff!" Hatfield turned to the storekeeper, whose face was beginning to show a seepage of returning color. "Now that I've been dealt a hand in this business, I'm playing it all the way. Don't let a crazy firebug's threats scare you, Logan. If anything happens to this store because you renew your contract with Dave Fox, I promise you'll get paid plenty by Corum, and his boss!"

Maury Logan's resolve hardened in him, under this assurance. "He had me scared, I admit it—plenty scared. Every dime I've got is sunk here and I'm not a particularly courageous man. But—" He picked up the contract, his jaw firm. "I don't like to be pushed around! Call Pete in here, for a witness. I'll sign this thing right now!"

"Attaboy!" cried Fox. "You won't be sorry. . . ."

It was late when Hatfield and Fox returned to Caprock, bodies tired from the hard jostling of the wagon. By this time, Matt Wycoff would already have learned from Grady and Claib Corum of Hatfield's throwing his weight behind the freight king's competition, and the outcome of the water-hole free-for-all. At Fox's wagon yard, O'Fallon greeted his boss with word that everything was suspiciously quiet. Wycoff likely was digesting the bad news, but it could be assumed that he was already casting about for future strategy.

Hatfield parted with Fox at the wagon yard, and went alone through the golden light of late afternoon toward the boxlike hotel, where he had taken a room for his stay in Caprock. The stage from the south was in. It still stood in the dust before the stageline office, and the crowd of loafers that always met an arriving coach had not yet dispersed.

Seeing this, the Ranger quickened his steps. At the hotel desk, when he asked for his key, he checked the register.

At the foot of the list of signatures a new name had been inscribed, in clear writing:

Ruth Bonniwell

The room number was one directly opposite his own, on the hotel's dingy second floor. Pocketing his key, Hatfield ascended the creaking stairs and in the gloomy hallway above turned directly to the door across from his own room. A light tapping of heels sounded in answer to his knock. The door opened, framing an attractive girl with golden hair and amber eyes.

"Miss Bonniwell?" he asked. "My name is Jim Hatfield. I saw your name

on the register and thought I'd introduce myself. You just arrived in town?"

"Yes," she answered. "On the stage, a few minutes ago. Won't you come in, Mr. Hatfield?"

"Thank you." But as he entered, ducking the low lintel as he removed his dusty Stetson, all formality between them was dropped the instant the door closed upon them. Hatfield's famous smile suddenly creased his face so broadly that it seemed as if the sun had come right into the room. He tossed his Stetson onto a chair, and seized both the girl's slim, strong hands. "Thanks for coming, Anita. And for following instructions. I had no idea you could make it here so soon. I sure hated to ask you, but I knew you'd do it for me!"

ANITA ROBERTSON smiled back at him, warmly. "You wouldn't have asked, if it hadn't been important. Of course I came. Though your wire didn't explain much—just that I was to take the first stage for Caprock, and register under the name of Ruth Bonniwell. I'm hoping for a little explanation!"

"You'll get it!" Hatfield promised soberly. "I'm not going to ask you to go any further into this thing, without showing you mighty plain just what it means, and what you may be letting yourself in for. Because it might lead you into danger!"

"I sort of took that for granted! Buck was disappointed that you didn't include him in the summons. I've always been the one who had to stay at home, while he got to share in the excitement." The golden-haired girl seated herself on the edge of the bed, while Hatfield pulled up the room's only chair for himself. "Well—fire away!"

She listened gravely, as the Ranger gave her a summary of the problem that faced him here at Caprock. She was a sweet and brave young woman, this Anita Robertson, who together with her young brother Buck were the only family Jim Hatfield could claim, and that only by adoption. Anita had supported herself and the boy by teaching school in Austin, ever since the loss of their parents in trouble on the Brazos, which was when Hatfield had met them and aided them.

Buck, though still in his teens, had become the Ranger's protegée. If Jim Hatfield's feelings for the sister were more than a rich and deep friendship, realization of the dangers and uncertainty of his job had prevented him from voicing them, even though her ready affection for him was apparent in her warm glance as she heard the story he told.

"So there it is!" he finished. "There's the whole story, and you can see why I couldn't put any of it in the wire I had Dave Fox send you. As long as Ruth

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

A MERRY SMOKE—Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. THE LARGE SIZE CANISTER OF SIR WALTER RALEIGH—IN A BEAUTIFUL YULETIDE PACKAGE—MAKES THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT!

Bonniwell is in the hands of Peso Vaught, her life hangs by a thread that any move on my part that's too hasty might snap. It's a mighty ticklish proposition, Anita. We have to be careful."

"You feel sure, then, that the stage was robbed and burned by these outlaws, at the suggestion of Matt Wycoff?"

"There's not a doubt of it. Everything links 'em together—the hiding of the girl at the stage station, which belongs to Wycoff, the torching of the stage, which I'm plumb certain Wycoff's firebug of a wagon boss, Corum, done and finally these, that I found hid in Matt Wycoff's desk."

From his pocket he took a packet of papers. "The Bonniwell girl had these in her reticule. She showed them to Dave Fox a short time before the stage was attacked. The tie-in is complete, at least as far as Wycoff is concerned. I'm only guessing, of course, that the man I saw at Cottonwood Station was actually Peso Vaught, but I tracked Vaught into this country and I'm following a hunch the trail that brought me here is tangled deep into this mess. I'm going on the assumption that Wycoff got hold of Vaught and his outlaws and made a deal with them to do a job which he couldn't count on any of his hirelings to manage for him without bungling."

HE STOOD up, took a turn or two about the narrow room. After one or two restless strides, he faced the girl.

"It's a dangerous job I'm asking you to do for me, Anita. But I don't see any other way to save that girl's life. Are you willing to take the risk?"

Anita Robertson rose and went to him, laid a hand on his arm. "Of course—you know I'll do anything I can," she said, smiling up at him. "And I won't be afraid, because you'll be there to look after me."

He squeezed her hand. "Thanks a heap!" He added, "It's time for supper, and I reckon you're just as hungry as I am. Afterwards, we'll start our plan to working."

CHAPTER VIII

The Impersonation

OPPORTUNITY came sooner than Hatfield had expected. He and Anita were just finishing their meal in the hotel dining room when a rather seedy-looking but dignified old gentleman entered through the beaded portieres that stretched across the entrance from the lobby, and went to what was obviously his accustomed table.

The Ranger indicated this man, and said, "That's Judge Himber, a close friend of old Zack Bonniwell's and, from all I've been able to learn, a thoroughly honest gent. I'm figuring we can use him. So we may as well start now."

"Just give me the cues," Anita said, smiling, but obviously a little frightened, "and I'll try to read my lines right. I've never done anything like this before."

"There's no need to worry," he assured her. "Not with the judge. Just give him one of your pretty smiles and you'll have him hogtied!"

They rose, and Hatfield escorted the girl over to the jurist's table. "Judge Himber?" he said, as the old man looked up in puzzlement. "My name is Hatfield—"

"Yes, yes—I know." The jurist got to his feet to accept the Ranger's handshake. "I've heard about you, and I knew you were in town. Glad to make your acquaintance." He looked at Anita, in obvious admiration. "And this charming young lady?"

"Someone who wants to meet you," said Hatfield. "Ruth Bonniwell."

"No!" The astonishment and delight that brightened the kindly old fellow's face was so touching that Jim Hatfield knew a sudden stab of shame, at the necessity of deceiving and taking advantage of him. But his purpose was a good one and so he went ahead.

The jurist had taken Anita's hands in

both of his own. "My dear, I can't tell you how happy I am, how very happy indeed! Please sit down. Or, better, let's go into the lobby where we can talk comfortably."

"But your supper?" Anita Robertson protested.

"Later—later! I'd be too excited to eat now, anyway."

Against her protests, the old man took Anita's arm and led them into the dingy lobby, keeping up a flow of talk.

"Your uncle was my closest friend," he said, as he showed her into a lumpy overstuffed armchair. "His death was a great shock. But he had told me so much about you, I feel as though I'd always known you. Strange," he added, frowning a little. "Somehow I had the impression that you would be dark."

Anita shot Jim Hatfield a look of alarm. "I—don't know how you could have thought that," she said, trying to laugh a little.

The Ranger broke in quickly, to switch the subject. "Just how did Mr. Bonniwell die, Judge?"

"An accident—most sad. He fell from the seat of one of his wagons, and a wheel—" He shrugged, with a shake of the head. "I warned him that he was getting too old for such active work. If there had only been someone there to save him—"

"You mean to say there were no witnesses?" Hatfield looked thoughtful, considering this.

Anita was remembering the part she had been instructed to perform. Opening her purse, she took out the packet of papers Hatfield had given her. "I've brought identification. I really know little about finance, and Mr. Hatfield suggested you might help to advise me in the dealings settling my uncle's estate."

"I'd be delighted." The old jurist was looking through the papers, obviously convinced beyond any doubt of the girl's identity—which was exactly what Hatfield wanted. "The Panhandle Freight and Cattle Company has considerable assets, in ranch property as well as the wagon line that Zack Bonniwell started with. You'll find Matthew Wycoff a strict man in business matters, but a fair one. Certainly he should offer you a very fair price for your share in the partnership."

"But I'm not sure that I want to sell," Anita demurred. "I may decide to keep an active voice in the firm."

The judge looked surprised. He was a man of the old school, to whom a woman in business must seem a strange notion. But he assured her gallantly, "It would be charming to have you remain with us."

AT THAT moment, Matt Wycoff himself entered the hotel.

Jim Hatfield saw the man's sleekly handsome face in profile, as he came striding across the threshold, and there was danger in the heavy scowl. Not glancing to right or left, or noticing the people in the corner of the room, he went directly to the desk and pulling the registration book around toward him, leafed through to the current page and ran a finger down the list of names. When it came to the end of the list, the muscles of Wycoff's jaw hardened beneath the spade beard. His glance lifted with a jerk toward the stairs.

Someone, plainly, had informed him that a Ruth Bonniwell had arrived on the stage and was registered here. And disbelief had brought him to the hotel to investigate the matter for himself. It would have been interesting to read his thoughts just then, although they were almost visible in the fury and astonishment that twisted his face.

Judge Himber had seen him, too, and was rising quickly, calling his name. Wycoff whipped around impatiently, checked himself with a start as his stare touched Jim Hatfield's expressionless face, passed to the strange girl beside him. He must have guessed the situation even before the old jurist could finish making introductions:

"Matt, this is Zack Bonniwell's niece! This is the girl you have been trying so

hard to locate."

They were all on their feet now, Anita holding out her hand with a smile that completely hid whatever she actually was feeling. Matt Wycoff, caught badly off-base, was not nearly so lucky at controlling his emotions. Face flushed, mouth working on unframed speech, he took her hand with the air of a man in a dazed confusion.

"I'm—delighted!" he managed to choke out. And then his glance fell on what Judge Himber was holding.

Hatfield thought that the man was on the verge of a sudden stroke. He stood there with his eyes riveted to that familiar packet of papers, as though unable to tear them away. A choked sound began in his throat, got no farther. He recovered from the grip of this shock only when the girl quietly withdrew her fingers from his, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Wycoff. I'm sure the partnership will continue a pleasant one."

"Ruth says she's going to stay with us, Matt," the old judge spoke up. "She's going to take over her uncle's share of the management. She'll make a mighty pretty partner, don't you think?"

Wycoff had found his voice now, but it didn't sound like his own. "It's—hardly the place for a girl—"

"That's for Miss Bonniwell to decide, I would imagine," Jim Hatfield put in. The remark won him Wycoff's attention, and a look that held naked, unconcealed murder. The bars were down, in that look.

Hatfield said then, "We've kept you from your supper long enough, Judge. There'll be plenty of time to talk. Meanwhile, perhaps Wycoff and Miss Bonniwell could be discussing some of the preliminary arrangements?"

"Yeah," the freight boss agreed, getting control of himself. "Maybe you'd like to look over the plant. I'd be glad to show you around, Miss."

"I'd love that," said the girl. You'll come too, Mr. Hatfield?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" he told her grimly.

They left the judge, and went through the darkened street to the big freight yard, the three of them walking abreast along the boardwalk, Anita between the two men, and no one speaking to ease the crackling tension among them. Wycoff took them to the office, used a key from his watch chain to open the door.

Inside, the lamp was burning in Wycoff's private office which, apparently, he had left in considerable haste to rush to the hotel. Without a word to Hatfield or the girl, he strode across the room and pulled out a drawer of the desk. When Hatfield and Anita followed him in uninvited, he had the box of cheroots and was pawning through it, his face warped with fury.

Hatfield said quietly, "No, Matt. They're gone, all right. The lady has those papers in her reticule right now."

THE big man speared him with his furious stare. Then, slamming the box shut, he dropped it back and kicked the drawer shut. He pulled out a second drawer, was about to reach inside when the whisper of gunmetal against holster, and the Ranger's warning voice, stopped him.

"Just leave the hideout gun alone. Set down in the chair, and put your hands where I can watch 'em. Then we'll talk."

Slowly Wycoff withdrew his fingers from the drawer. Slowly he let himself into the chair, where he poised with the tautness of a coiled spring, his corrosive stare on the man and the girl who stood across the desk facing him.

"So!" he whispered tightly. "You use that badge of yours, Hatfield, as a shield for theft and blackmail! You broke into this office, stole those papers from my desk. I can send you to prison for that, my friend!" He cut his hard glance to Anita. "You too, girlie—whoever you are. Impersonation with intent to defraud!"

Anita's eyes widened. "Why, Jim! He's *threatening* us!"

"Yeah." The Ranger's lips quirked in a thin smile. "I know he'd try to bluff.

He's only playing for time, though. He's got sense enough to know we can tie up these properties so that he can't do a day's business. We know too much about him. Things I've picked up, here and there, other things I learned from him and his bully boy, Claib Corum, while I was hid in that closet yonder last night."

The freight boss looked as though he had been slugged in the solar plexus.

"So that's why things went wrong at the water-hole today! I couldn't figure out how you and Fox had outsmarted me. What has he done, anyway—cut you in, in return for helping you break me?"

Hatfield's gray-green eyes chilled to ice, and his face went hard. "I'll try to forget you said that!" he snapped. "While we're at it, let's lay out our cards—all of them. Including Peso Vaught, and the Bonniwell girl. Where are they, Wycoff? Where are you holding her?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Wycoff's voice was thin, careful. His look had withdrawn behind veiling lids. Just then there was something about him as slimy as a snail that pulls back into the defenses of its shell, and waits out its enemy's next move.

"Then I reckon maybe you can tell me how these papers got in your desk!"

"Of course." Smugness entered the freighter's voice. "Ruth Bonniwell sent them to me through the mail. And you can't prove otherwise!"

Hatfield let him enjoy his moment of triumph. Then he murmured, "It so happens I've got a witness who saw Ruth Bonniwell the day of the stage massacre. She showed him the letters, Wycoff."

"You lie!" But Matt Wycoff had jerked up straight in the chair, and his voice trembled. "What witness?"

The Ranger only shook his head. "Hunh-uh. I'm not going to mention any names and let somebody else in for a killing—like Ed Smalley's! Besides, I don't even need this witness. I've got something better. There's one letter I held back from that packet, one I haven't shown the judge yet. It's in your handwriting, Matt. It instructs Ruth Bonniwell about her trip to the West, telling her to be sure and take a certain stage, and not any other—the stage that was slated to be sacked by Peso Vaught's men! You remember writing such a letter, I reckon?"

CHAPTER IX

Crooked Trump Play

MATT WYCOFF made no answer—merely sat with hands clenched white on the arms of his chair, that hooded look in his eyes. Jim Hatfield gave the six-gun a flip, shoved it into holster.

"You have till morning to think it over and decide to produce Ruth Bonniwell," he said grimly. "And she'd better be whole and unharmed! Otherwise, I show the letter to Judge Himber. That's the way my cards read, Wycoff. I think they top anything in your hand!"

The man's lips barely moved. "And if I don't—or can't—produce her?"

"I think you can," Hatfield replied airily. "And you will. You've got no choice."

"Get out!" Wycoff was suddeny on his feet. "Get the hell out of here. You can't intimidate me, with this girl you're ringing in and your lying talk of witnesses and letters!"

Hatfield showed unconcern as he took Anita's arm, turned with her to the doorway. But there, another word from the freight boss halted him. Wycoff's whole tone and manner had changed. Glancing back, Hatfield saw him leaning tensely over the desk, sweat making a glistening sheen across his handsome face.

"Hatfield!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "You've got a price—even you! How much for the letter? Anything in reason!"

Jim Hatfield looked at him coldly, seeing the mark of fear on this man who had been so arrogant moments before.

But he only turned his back, and walked out of the building with Anita Robertson on his arm. And Matt Wycoff had had his answer.

As Hatfield and Anita walked back to the hotel the Ranger told her, "It's working! We've got him hornswaggled, and there's only one out for Matt Wycoff. He's got to produce Ruth Bonniwell. He can't accept you, without having his control of the firm tied up and, meanwhile, there's the threat of the letter hanging over him. He knows he has to make up his mind, and fast! By morning, even, he may be ready to surrender."

"And then?"

"Why, with the girl once safe from his hands I can go ahead and clean this thing up—Wycoff, and Claib Corum, and that gang of Peso Vaught's that led me here to begin with."

Anita shook her head, troubled. "I don't know, Jim. I'm worried. Wycoff is plainly clever, and unscrupulous. And don't forget, as long as Ruth Bonniwell is a prisoner it's really he who holds the trump card. I can't think that he'll give up too easily!"

"I know," the Ranger agreed. "Believe me, I ain't underestimating him. Even a trapped wolf will fight for all he's worth, and Wycoff is crafty enough to come up with another scheme or two, before he's finished. But we've handed him the challenge, and all we can do is wait to learn what his answer is, and check the move when it comes."

He lay awake for some time, that night, reviewing this business in detail, going over every step to see if he had played his cards wisely, if there was any trick he should have taken and had failed to take. Anita's last remark bothered him, because he knew that she was right. Matt Wycoff was far from beaten, and it could be taken for granted he would shake at least one more crooked play out of his sleeve.

Somehow, Jim Hatfield could not escape the thought that he should be able to anticipate any such next move, and manage to check it before it came. But just now his brain did not seem to be working. He had kept up a hard pace, these last weeks of tracing the illusive trail of the killer, Peso Vaught. He needed sleep, and there was no good in lying here and torturing himself. With morning his head should be cleared, better ready for the final showdown with Matt Wycoff. . . .

He awoke to the pound of running boots along the sidewalk below his open window, the hoarse shouting of voices. He rolled over to a sitting position in the sagging hotel bed, noting that night's darkness was in the room.

But, turning to the window he saw beyond it an unnatural, shifting glow of light.

•

AT ONCE he was on his feet, hurrying to the window and leaning out. At the lower end of the long street, flames spouted upward, sparks streamed toward the distant stars, paling them. He did not need the shouts of men spilling out into the street in varying states of undress to know the meaning of what he saw.

He had slept nearly dressed, and it took him only seconds to stamp into his boots, to snatch his twin gun-belts from the chair beside the bed and sling them about his middle, to grab his Stetson as he headed for the door. Just as he stepped into the hallway, the door opposite was opened and Anita Robertson cried, "Jim! What is it?"

"A fire—at Dave Fox's freight yard!"

"Do you suppose Wycoff—"

"I wouldn't put it past him," Hatfield told her bleakly. "Or that firebug wagon boss— You keep to your room. I've got to get down there!"

He didn't wait for her promise, but was already on his way along the hall, taking the stairs to the lobby two at a time. The flimsy hotel shook to the tread of feet, rang with excited voices. Hatfield shoved through a crowd that had collected on the veranda, and headed for the burning freight yard at a run.

There, he found almost complete confusion. It was the feed barn that was

burning, already past salvage. It laid a wavering wash of light across the freight yard and showed the men running wildly about, helpless in their excitement. The braying of mules trapped within the barn made a hideous sound, above the crackling of the flames.

But rescuers were there, braving the inferno within to reach the frenzied animals and rush them out to safety. Hatfield glimpsed Dave Fox's stubby figure, in the midst of this work. He tried to reach the man's side but Fox had gone plunging again into the seething, swirling torrent of flame that lay beyond the gaping double doors.

Big O'Fallon, face blackened with soot and smoke, came running past and Hatfield caught at the man's arm. He had to shout, to be heard above the mad confusion and the crackling fire: "How did this start?"

"You tell me!' the Irishman yelled back distractedly. "All at once, the whole barn was going up. The most sudden damn thing I ever—"

Hatfield pulled him about, pointing. "Look! There goes one of the wagons. If we don't move it, it'll torch the rest!"

In the concerted effort to save the livestock, no one seemed to have noticed what was happening to the three big freight wains, which stood in a line along the compound fence. Floating brands from the barn had alighted on the canvas of one of these wagons and it was already in flames, immediately endangering the remaining pair.

Quickly O'Fallon and the Ranger collared help from among the bystanders and threw themselves at the big wagon, putting their weight against the heavy box and the wide, iron-tired wheels. Smoke engulfed them, set them coughing in a shower of blazing brands as they heaved to get the wagon into motion. Then the wheels turned and the blazing vehicle was rolling ponderously out of the lineup, and men shouted and scattered out of the way of it.

Slapping at sparks that had started his clothes to smoldering, Hatfield told the Irishman, "Now let's see if we can get a bucket line organized and try to save the warehouse."

The livestock had all been rescued by this time, and were being corraled with some diffiuculty at a safe distance from the doomed barn which was almost gone. Flames showed at the interstices of the straining walls; the ridgepole sagged inward, threatening to collapse at any moment. All the men who had been working around the building had pulled back, waiting for it to fall in upon itself. But when it did, there would be a terrific explosion of burning brands and the warehouse and office, adjoining, would be in immediate peril.

O'FALLON saw the danger, and quickly was at work impressing men for the labor of passing along buckets of well water, to wet down the side of the building nearest the barn.

Hatfield suddenly had another worry. He realized that it had been some minutes since he had seen anything of Dave Fox—not since glimpsing him as he dashed into the burning barn. He began scanning the crowd for Dave, knowing he could expect to find him in the thickest of the fight. Stopping men to ask questions that got him only shrugs for answers, he felt a sick dread at thought of Fox trapped within that inferno.

If so, there was nothing any man could do about it now. But somehow Jim Hatfield could not believe that the little scrapper had come to such an end. Instead, he went looking through the yard, hunting Fox in the bucket line, at the mule pen, everywhere, but discovering no sign of him.

Then someone said, "Why, yeah! I seen him just a couple of minutes ago. He was heading around the far side of the warehouse."

Hatfield thanked him and started in that direction. Here, away from the fire and the excitement, lay darkness and a strange quiet. He wondered what could have brought Fox to this corner of the big yard. He held up a minute search-

ing the shadows, then started moving toward the big fence at the rear corner of the building.

Against firelight reflected by the fence boarding, he saw a man's figure, crouching.

"Dave!" he called, and broke into a sprint.

The man heard him and straightened, turning—and Hatfield knew he was too big to be Dave Fox. At the same instant, he caught a pungent scent that stung his nostrils—kerosene! And he knew!

Claib Corum spun aside, putting himself into the deep shadows against the side of the building. Gunflame speared at Hatfield, and he heard a bullet split the air close beside his cheek. His own Colt had slid into his right hand and, spread-legged, the Ranger stood and triggered at the blurred powderspark. He shot twice, then held his hand. He caught the sodden sound of a heavy body sagging against the dark wall and sliding down it.

He moved forward again. The smell of kerosene was nearly overpowering here. A good section of the building corner must be soaked in it. His toe struck an overturned tin from which the oil was spilling out upon the earth. But Claib Corum had set his last fire. He lay face-down in the reeking puddle, and there was no life or movement in his gross, limp body.

Jim Hatfield straightened, face flinty in the darkness. From somewhere near he caught a sound; heard it a second time before he knew it to be a human's groan. He turned quickly, nearly stumbled over another body stretched out upon the ground. This one was alive. Hatfield did not dare strike a match, with that kerosene all around him, but he knew who the man was.

"Dave Fox!" he cried. "You all right?"

"Yeah!" the freighter exclaimed, trying to sit up. "I guess so. Thought I—saw something suspicious, and come for a look-see. I must have run my head into a wall!"

"More likely into the barrel of Claib Corum's gun! It was him you saw, ready to finish the job of burning you out. I stopped him just in time."

"So that was it! I thought the fire started doggone sudden!"

Hatfield said, "I wish I hadn't had to kill him. A confession might have tied Wycoff into this, made Wycoff liable for the damage done here. As it stands, even if he ordered this burning we haven't got the evidence to convict him."

"Damn the evidence!" gritted Fox, as he stumbled painfully to his feet. "He's probably ruined me tonight, but I can take it out of his hide! Damned if I don't—"

"Go easy! We're not finished with Wycoff yet. I'll pin this on him if it's humanly possible! That's a promise!"

CHAPTER X

The Last Trick

NOW the fire was under control, and would cause no further destruction; but it had already caused damage enough. With his barn and feed and one wagon gone, Dave Fox had sustained a crippling loss from which it was too early to say whether or not he could manage to recover. He stood with Hatfield and O'Fallon, surveying the wreckage and the seething bed of coals that was all that remained of the big barn, and ran a sleeve tiredly across his sweating face.

"I'll worry about it tomorrow," he said heavily. "Right now I've got to try to get these mules quieted. Good thing they've got better sense than horses, or we might have lost half of them in that inferno!"

Hatfield laid an encouraging hand on his shoulder. "Don't figure it's quits, Dave, until the last dog is hung. If you want to see me about anything, I'll be at the hotel."

Fox managed a grin. "Who talks of

quitting? Hell, the fight is only startin'!"

The excitement in the town was subsiding as the Ranger walked back to the hotel and wearily climbed the stairs to his room. His hand was on the knob when it occurred to him that Anita would be waiting to hear news of the fire. He crossed to her door and knocked softly. Surprisingly, there was no answer. He would hardly have thought she could go back to sleep, with the excitement of the fire. He knocked a second time, louder, and spoke her name.

Then, suddenly alarmed, he twisted the knob and the door swung open under his fingers.

A lamp was burning in a wall bracket, and the light it gave told him all he needed to know, threw the night's happenings into their true perspective. It showed him the cruel signs of struggle, in a chair overturned, a rug kicked back under scuffling feet. And this had been the pattern of Wycoff's last crooked play! Setting the wagon yard fire in order to draw Hatfield away from the hotel, and give him a clear field to steal Anita Robertson out of her room!

The Lone Wolf felt his hands tightened into fists, felt the stiff mask of facial muscles that were graven in bitter lines. "So it's your trick, after all, Wycoff!" he gritted. With the complete audacity that was characteristic of the man, Wycoff seized as his hostage the one person whose safety meant more to Jim Hatfield than any other thing on earth.

Moving blindly, he wheeled about and ran down through the building, taking the outside stairs leading directly to the ground from the second-story corridor. He knew there was little use in asking questions. With the fire drawing all attention to the lower end of town, no one would have noticed what happened at the hotel.

But beyond any doubt, Anita's kidnapers would have had horses ready here in the darkness in back of the hotel, to take her swiftly out of Caprock town and to some secret hiding place. Even Matt Wycoff would never dare the fury of the Lone Wolf by staying within his reach.

Accordingly, Hatfield went directly to the darkened stable maintained for the hotel's guests. His only hope now was the meager one that, with Goldy under him, he could strike about blindly and somehow pick up the trail.

As he crossed the threshold of the barn, straw slithered under a shifting boot and something hard was rammed into his back.

"All right, Mr. Lone Wolf!" rasped a voice. "Put up your hands, or I'll blow a tunnel right through you!"

On the other side of the Ranger, another voice added, "Matt Wycoff is waiting to see you—but he don't much care if we bring you to him alive, or dead!"

FOR a despairing, reckless instant Jim Hatfield was poised on the verge of making the move toward his guns that he had been warned against. Then, under a stern discipline, he forced his hands to lift shoulder-high, and felt the twin Colts plucked, one by one, from his belt holsters.

"You get 'em both?" demanded the voice behind the gun muzzle. It was recognizable now as the voice of the tough named Grady. "We can't be too careful of this bird," Grady warned his companion, then told the Ranger, "All right, put 'em down now. Your bronc is already saddled. We been waitin' here for quite a while, to pick you up as soon as you rose to the bait of the girl being gone."

"Have you harmed her any?" Hatfield demanded tightly.

"Shucks, no!" Grady's tone was mocking. "Matt sees to it we're little gentlemen when they's pretty girls around. Now it looks like we're going to have two of 'em on our hands for a spell."

Two of them. Anita, and Ruth Bonniwell!

A heavy shove from behind all but sent him sprawling. "Get a move on! We ain't got all night!"

The three of them moved into the stable—a flimsy structure of mesquite

pole construction, with a grain bin and pegs for hanging gear occupying one wall, and a half dozen open stalls opposite. Straw slithered underfoot; a hoof struck planking where saddled horses waited, tethered to a pole roof support. Faintly in the gloom Hatfield made out the gleaming hide of his golden sorrel.

"You better mount first, Lewt," Grady told his companion. "While I keep a gun on this gent. He's tricky—I found that out yesterday in that water-hole fracas!"

Lewt jerked his reins free of the pole. Saddle leather creaked in the stillness as he swung astride. Then the other two moved to their own horses. Hatfield lifted the saddle skirt, started to tug at the latigo.

"What are you up to?" Grady demanded suspiciously. "Quit stalling! I told you we had him ready to ride!"

"You left room for two horses under that cinch strap!" Hatfield grunted and then, with Goldy maneuvered into the position he wanted, he gave the sorrel a solid jab against the flank with his fist.

Goldy was already fidgety enough, after having been saddled by a stranger's hands. He leaped away from the thrust, pivoting at the end of his reins. He struck Lewt's bronc and threw it into momentary confusion. And at the same instant, Jim Hatfield was whirling to launch his weight against Grady.

He saw gunmetal gleam in Grady's hand, threw up an arm to deflect the weapon just as the man's finger crimped trigger. Flame speared toward the shed's low ceiling. Then the wind left Grady with a *whoosh* as Hatfield drove a fist into his solid middle, just above the belt buckle.

Lewt had his horse under control and Hatfield could hear him cursing, ready to use his gun if he could find a target. But the two struggling men were an indistinct and shifting mass in the gloom of the shed, and Lewt could not risk it.

Sobbing for wind, Grady came back at the Ranger with a swinging blow that caught him on the side of the head, half-stunning him, briefly. Grady bored ahead then in triumph, gun-barrel lifted for a finish. But Hatfield was not so quickly beaten. Willing strength into his blows, he met the charge with bruising fists, left and right, piling them straight into the dim blob of Grady's face. He thought his fist would crack as it caught the hard point of the jaw.

Grady's head jerked back, and he was going down.

And as he fell, Hatfield managed to get a hand on the smoking six-gun and wrest it from limp fingers. In turning, the Ranger slipped on loose straw that threw him to one knee. Crouching there, he swung the barrel up toward the dark figure in saddle and cried, "Lewt! Drop the gun!"

HIS answer was a curse, and the flash and roar of the man's weapon. Coldly, Hatfield triggered back and heard the man go sliding, like a sack of grain, toward the straw litter among the hoofs of the frightened horses.

He was not dead, but probably close to it. In a quick search Hatfield found one of his own Colts in the man's pocket and another tucked behind the waistband. The Ranger transferred them to his holsters, discarding Grady's captured six-gun. Then he went back to where that tough was stirring and groaning, beginning to recover.

Leaning over him, Hatfield gathered a handful of the man's shirtfront in a hard twist. "Where are they?" he gritted. "Where's Wycoff, and his prisoners?"

"Go to hell!"

Hatfield hit him, a stunning blow with the open palm, driven to this deed by the hard pressures of need and escaping time. "You're going to tell me! You'll talk, mister, or—"

Grady recognized the implacable promise in that threat, and his nerve crumbled before it. "Don't!" he cried out in fear, a protesting arm across his face. "The ranch—where I was supposed to take you!"

Then men, with bobbing lanterns and

shouting voices were rushing into the horse shed.

For all his shortness of legs, Dave Fox was among the first to appear. "Jim!" he cried. "When I heard shooting here at the hotel, something told me you'd be mixed up in it! Is that Grady you've got there? Trying to even the score, I reckon, for the beating you gave him yesterday!"

"I wish it was only that!" the Ranger said grimly. "Listen, Dave—and mighty careful! Matt Wycoff owns a ranch somewhere hereabouts, don't he?"

"Why, yes. Chimney brand. Six miles north and west of town. Headquarters for the partnership's cattle dealings. What about it?"

"That's where they're holding Ruth Bonniwell, and now they've grabbed Anita Robertson and she's been taken there, too. I'm on my way," he hurried on, not waiting for Dave's exclamation. "You get some men together and follow me. Only don't move in unless gunplay starts. Can I count on you?"

"You know you can, Jim! But—riding alone! You realize you're apt to run into Peso Vaught and his gang?"

"This is not a job for an army," Hatfield told him quietly. "The lives of both girls depend on quiet. I've got to manage, somehow, to get to them before the cleanup starts."

"Of course." Dave nodded, seeing the bleak wisdom of Hatfield's argument. "But we'll back you up! All the way!"

Jim Hatfield was already in saddle. He ducked the low frame of the shed doorway. Then, giving Goldy his head, he went up the long street at a dusting run.

The big, dark bulk of the Panhandle Freight buildings flashed by. Then he was alone with the starry darkness and the wide, rolling plains, and the night wind beating against him. . . .

A good-sized spread, this Chimney Ranch. Hatfield tethered the golden sorrel in cottonwoods lining a creek that ran behind the headquarters, and waited there for long minutes while he got the pattern of the place firmly in his mind.

There was a battery of corrals, a huge barn, more than the usual number of secondary buildings. There was one long structure that housed a bunk room and the kitchen for the crew; both dark, now.

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HERD THIS

A Tall Texas Tale

SOME of the old hands were chewing the fat in the bunkhouse one rainy day, and Windy Riley told about a herd of buffalo he'd run onto up in Wyoming one time that took him a full day's ride to get around.

"That must have been toward the end of buffalo days, after they'd been thinned out considerable, when you run onto that little herd," said Bull McCoy. "Or maybe they never had no real big herds in Wyoming like in Texas.

"Why, I mind the time I was camped in a draw along the Brazos when I hear a rumble that sounds like thunder, only louder and longer, and I beat it back to where my tent's pitched between some big old oaks. I made it just in time, too, because that thunder was a buffalo stampede that come over the edge of the draw like a steady brown wave. For three days and nights they come without a break, and here I was out of water and near dyin' of thirst and the river only forty feet away! It was on the morning of the fourth day before there was a let-up and I could finally get to the river for a drink. I sashayed up to the top of the draw for a look and right away beat it back to my camp. Then I quick filled every bucket and tin I could find with water, because I seen something from up there on the rim that I should have figured on, being in Texas and all."

He paused, and one of the younger cowboys couldn't restrain himself. "What was it you seen, anyway?"

"Why, what I seen," said Bull, "was the main herd a-coming, of course. Yessir, Texas had quite a passel of Buffalo in those days."

Another building, also unlighted, was apparently the company office. A barn lantern swayed from a hook on a corral gate post, putting the only illumination across that quiet scene except for a single lamp that burned, behind curtains, on the second floor of the big main house.

Jim Hatfield, pondering the question of locating a couple of prisoners in a layout of this size, considered the yellow square of light with thoughtful eyes. The two kidnaped girls could, of course, be in any of the buildings. But the house—and that window — roused his interest. It should not be too difficult to work his way over there without causing an alarm.

CHAPTER XI

In the Study

SILENTLY Hatfield moved forward, at a crouching run that sought every advantage of shadow and hiding place. He worked in past the corrals, gave the yard a closer scrutiny from the corner of a tool shed, only yards away from the bunkhouse. Sounds of sleeping men came from there, but nothing to give alarm.

Directly ahead lay a patch of open ground, faintly lighted by the lantern on the pole. It took nerve to venture across this exposed stretch but he took advantage of an old wagon that stood, tongue-grounded, in the middle of the yard. Then he was out of reach of the fan of lantern glow, and the big ranchhouse stood before him.

A moment, first, to check for sign of discovery; finding none, the Ranger went on. He reached the side of the house, prowled forward toward the front hunting an entrance. The windows were high-set, and there was no side door. Passing directly beneath the second story window, where lamplight still shone, Hatfield came at last to the veranda across the front of the building.

Dry, leafless vines shadowed the porch. Through them, he caught sight of something that made him pull back with a start—a cigarette's glowing end.

Using extreme caution, the Lone Wolf moved again into position to examine the veranda and what it held. With their chairs canted back against the wall, two men sat talking and smoking, but thanks to the sun-killed vines, rattling like dry paper in the wind, Jim Hatfield could make out nothing they said. Still he did not believe the voice of either was Matt Wycoff's.

Impatience roweled him. He fingered a holstered Colt, computing the danger of rousing the entire ranch if he ventured to move against these two men. And then one of them rose abruptly, to the thud of lowered chair legs, and threw his cigarette in a bright arc across the rail.

"Well, Turk," he said, on a louder tone so that his words reached the listener clearly, "I'll leave you with it. Me for some shut-eye!"

"I envy you," Turk said sourly. He had not moved from his chair.

The other man walked over to the open front door, peered inside. "I suppose you could hear all right, if Matt wanted you for anything?"

"Hell, yes. It's just up there at the head of the stairs, and a lot cooler out here than waiting inside on the steps. Besides, Matt won't have no trouble—not until Grady shows up with the Ranger, anyhow."

"Naw." There was a coarse chuckle. "I wouldn't mind, myself, spending an hour alone with a couple of gals as pretty as those two."

A moment later, the man had taken his departure, tramping down the broad veranda steps. He rang his spurs across the yard, heading for the bunkhouse, and Turk's chair creaked as the remaining guard settled more comfortably to wait out his vigil.

Silently, Jim Hatfield drew a gun from holster.

The wind had come up stronger sud-

denly. It lashed at the dead vines, shaking them with fury, then falling away again. Hatfield lifted himself to the rail, waited like that until another gust sprang up. Quickly then he slipped across and through the vine screen, poised lightly there with gun leveled and ready, waiting to see if the guard had heard him. But Turk sat unmoving, head tilted forward almost as though asleep.

Hatfield considered speaking, but decided against the risk of an outcry. Instead, he moved stealthily in toward the seated man, counting on the wind in the vines to cover any sound he made.

Then he stood directly over the chair. Some hint of his nearness brought Turk's head up sharply, started him leaping to his feet. The Ranger's gun-barrel came down sharply. Cushioned by the man's Stetson, it thudded dully home—and Turk dropped like a plummet.

SWIFTLY Hatfield had the limp body by an arm and leg, to drag it deep into the shadows at the end of the veranda. Once more slipping a gun then, he turned toward the open doorway.

Stale, trapped heat breathed at him from within the darkened house. There was a narrow entrance hall, and then the flight of stairs of which the guard had spoken. Hatfield groped and found the handrail, set his boot on the lowest step and climbed lightly up. In the corridor above him he saw a streak of light from a half-closed door. And, as he took the last steps more slowly, Matt Wycoff's voice came booming along the hall in an angry shout:

"By thunder, young woman! If you think stubborness is going to save you, you're bad mistaken!"

Setting foot on the hall carpet, Hatfield took two strides that brought him into view of the lighted doorway. He placed his shoulders against the wall, and leveled his six-gun.

Facing him, from the chair in which she sat bound, was a black-haired girl he knew must be—at last—the missing Ruth Bonniwell. She fitted Dave Fox's description exactly. But she showed the effects of the ordeal through which she must have gone. Her face was wan and streaked with dirt, her clothing rumpled. Her hair hung tangled and uncombed, to her shoulders. And in her blue eyes was terror.

And yet there was pride and breeding in the way she sat there. Even now it was plain why the wistful beauty of this girl had haunted Dave Fox, in the days since their one brief meeting.

Suddenly Matt Wycoff swung into the Ranger's line of vision. The freight boss was pacing the floor of the room which was, Hatfield judged from the books lining its walls, a study of some sort. Old Zack Bonniwall's, most likely, since it seemed hardly probable that Wycoff gave much of his time to reading. At sight of the solid figure and the florid, handsome face, Hatfield started forward, then checked himself, for he wanted to hear what the man was saying.

Wycoff was addressing, not Ruth Bonniwell, but someone out of Hatfield's line of vision, and he was plainly close to the boiling point.

"You may as well get it through your head," he blustered, "that I'm a man who generally manages to do what he sets out to do! I've built this freight and cattle business until there's nothing in the Panhandle region that can hope to compete with it. When that pious fool, Zack Bonniwell, tried to interfere with my methods I arranged a little wagon accident that stopped him from making further trouble. And yet you—" He turned toward his unseen auditor, and slammed a fist against a desk, the corner of which was just visible from where Hatfield stood. "You think you can refuse to do what I order!"

The voice of Anita Robinson answered —coolly, ringing with a courage and strength that made Jim Hatfield proud to hear her. "You had to murder Zack Bonniwell. Now it looks as though his niece has also proved too much for you!"

Matt Wycoff swore and, whirling toward the bound girl seized her by the

hair, forced her head back till her eyes met his own, unflinching. "Stubborn!" he exploded. "Stubborn, crazy women! What can you do with them? Starve 'em, do everything but use a hot iron on their hides—"

"And still she won't sign away her rights to her uncle's property!" Anita finished stoutly. "And why should she, when she knows you'll kill her as soon as the thing is done?"

Matt Wycoff swung back to the desk. "It ain't her signature I want any more—not since the Ranger has rung *you* in on the deal. You've had yourself identified to the satisfaction of that old fool, Judge Himber. So as far as I'm concerned, you *are* Ruth Bonniwell. Your handwriting can be confirmed from the hotel register, if there's any question. It's just a matter of taking up that pen and putting your hand to the paper in front of you."

"What makes you think I'd sign?" Anita demanded scornfully. "When she wouldn't? And what do you suppose Jim Hatfield is going to do to you?"

"Nothing! You want to know why?" Matt Wycoff placed his hands on the edge of the desk, leaned over it to bring his triumphant leer close to Anita Robertson's face. "Because at this very minute my men are holding Jim Hatfield prisoner!"

"You—you're lying!"

BUT quick conviction and horror were plain in Anita's trembling voice. Apparently she read such sureness in Wycoff's ugly stare that she could not help but believe. The man himself seemed convinced of his own brag. After all, the trap had been carefully laid—so well, in fact, that Jim Hatfield had to admit that it had come within an ace of closing on him.

Matt Wycoff straightened. "So you see why I think you'll do this. Whichever choice you make, the lawman you obviously think so much of is going to die. But there are many different kinds of death, and unless you sign Ruth Bonniwell's name to this paper, Jim Hatfield's finish will be a mighty unpleasant one!"

The Ranger, listening, could hardly credit such ruthless cruelty. Was this really the man honest Zack Bonniwell had trusted, and taken into partnership? Or, he wondered with a keen insight, had greed and ambition, and the success of his own schemes served to warp a brilliant mind?

Hatfield's jaw set; his hand tightened on the butt of the drawn six-gun. But just as he took a step forward, meaning to put an end to this thing, there came an unexpected interruption.

Boots crossed the entranceway below, started toward him up the dark steps. A voice he recognized at once as that of the man he now was positive was Peso Vaught, called excitedly, "Matt! Matt Wycoff!"

Quickly the Ranger drew back again into the shadows. Peso was taking the turn in the stairs now, moving almost at a run. The man in the shadows could have put out a hand and touched him as he went by. Then the gaunt shape of the outlaw was silhouetted as he strode into the study, elbowing the door wide open. Now Hatfield could see Anita Robertson at the desk, her frightened glance turning to the man who entered.

The freight boss was scowling. "Well, what is it, Peso? What's the trouble?"

"Trouble enough!" the outlaw told him. "I just now found that man of yours, Turk, out there on the veranda—knocked senseless!"

"The devil you did!"

"He says something hit him—he don't know what. A gun-barrel, I'd guess. Somebody's here, Matt—on the prowl!"

The impact of this news showed in Wycoff's face, that suddenly held a taint of fear. He looked quickly toward the shadows beyond the hall door; a hand moved jerkily toward a coat pocket which plainly held a gun.

Peso Vaught said coldly, "That Ranger—you're plumb sure he's been taken care of?"

"I left two of my best men to bring him in!"

"Then I'd say it was long past time they brought him! Could be you've outsmarted yourself this time, Matt! I've told you before, Jim Hatfield is no man to fool around with!"

The man in the hall saw the dawning of new hope come into Anita's lovely face, saw her golden head lift suddenly. "Then you *were* lying?" she cried to Wycoff. "You only tried to frighten me, with something I could have known couldn't be true!"

"Shut up!" Wycoff snarled at her, and turned back to the outlaw. "Get the crew routed out, and start hunting! Search every foot of this ranch, and every building. If anything moves where it shouldn't —drill it!"

Peso Vaught lifted gaunt shoulders in a shrug. "All right," he grunted. "But if you've gone and turned that Hatfield loose on us, I don't promise me or my gang will help clean up the mess. You aren't paying us e n o u g h for that, Wycoff!"

He walked past the freight boss, out into the darkened corridor. And there the Lone Wolf was waiting, Colt leveled. As the outlaw swung past him toward the stairs, Hatfield said quietly:

"Lift' em, Peso! This is as far as you go."

CHAPTER XII

Settlement

FOR just an instant, Peso Vaught froze. But he was a man of great though misused courage, and of a wiry, taut-strung quickness. Suddenly he was whirling away from the shadowy figure, making a dive for the black well of the stairs.

Hatfield, not thinking any man would take so desperate a chance, was a breath slow in reacting. The trigger bit into his finger; the flash and roar of the Colt smashed in the close confines of the hall. But he knew, even as he fired, that the bullet would drill empty air above Vaught's plunging, bent-over shape.

Clearing the half-flight of steps, the outlaw had lit, catlike, upon the landing; immediately, from the darkness there, his gun answered Hatfield. Plaster sprang from the wall, a foot from the Ranger's elbow. He thumbed off a second bullet, moving sideward as he did, in order to avoid targeting the muzzle flash. And then a shadow, plugging up the doorway of the study, pulled him hastily in that direction.

Matt Wycoff stood there.

A gun glinted in the freighter's hand, aimed squarely at the Ranger, but before the man could fire Hatfield stamped a quick bullet into the wood, so close that Wycoff cried out hoarsely and stumbled back. The door slammed shut, throwing the hall into total darkness except for a faint pencil line of yellow light. Hatfield could have sent a slug through the panel but he would not endanger the two girls imprisoned in the room.

Outside in the ranch yard, now, there were startled cries from the bunkroom crew, roused by the shooting in the main house. Thoughts of being trapped in this second-story hall spurring him to recklessness, Jim Hatfield called out suddenly, "Peso!" and started at a crouch directly toward the stairs.

The outlaw's gun drove a spear of flame almost into his face. He triggered back, slanting his Colt barrel across the railing. He thought he almost heard lead strike flesh and bone; he did hear Vaught's body topple, slowly, go clattering down the uncarpeted steps, to lodge half-way.

And as Hatfield waited for the gun echoes to die, he became aware of new sounds in the night—six-shooters beginning their leaden song, and many hoofbeats bearing in on the ranch.

"You hear that, Wycoff?" he shouted to the closed study door. "It's Dave Fox, bringing men from Caprock to clean up this crooked outfit! Peso Vaught is dead. Now I'm coming after you!"

No answer, for a moment.

"Come right ahead!" The big man's jeering challenge held a taunt that froze something in Hatfield. "Remember I've got your girl in here. She's my passport, to get me out of this place alive. So you can just drop your guns and walk through that door with both hands in the air!"

Anita's voice cried: "No! He'll kill you, Jim!"

"Wycoff!" the Lone Wolf called hoarsely, feeling the sudden cold sweat spring out upon his body. "Let her go! Turn her loose, do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you! Do you want me to twist her arm clean off, Hatfield?" A sharp sob of pain torn from the girl's throat gave this threat a terrible emphasis. "You better make up your mind, lawman, good and fast, because— Why, you devil!"

Hesitating no longer, the Ranger hurled himself at the door, sent it crashing in to slam against the wall. In the center of the room, Matt Wycoff and Anita Robertson were struggling, and Hatfield saw now the reason for the man's sudden outcry. Anita, twisting about in his grasp, had manged somehow to get her teeth into the hand that gripped her.

Too late Wycoff shook loose, threw her sprawling hard against the big desk. By then Hatfield was already upon him. The Ranger did not risk a shot. He went straight in and his fist lashed from the shoulder, took Wycoff in the middle of his handsome, congested features and sent him stumbling backward.

THERE had never been greater fury in Hatfield, the calm efficiency that was second nature to him forgotten as he closed at last with this enemy. He even threw aside the gun that encumbered him, in order to move in and deal punishment with his bare hands.

But Matt Wycoff was a fighter himself, and a good one; and desperation gave power and swiftness to his defense. He gave ground but he was fighting back now. Hatfield took a hard blow to the chest that was punishing, but bored ahead and drew blood from Wycoff's florid cheek with a glancing, stinging right.

Books spilled in a flutter of pages as the freighter caromed into the wall and his elbow swept a whole shelf clear. Stumbling and tripping over the scattered volumes, he still retreated. And Jim Hatfield went after him, ready to back him against the wall of bookshelves and there finish this.

Almost too late, he heard Anita's quick scream: "Look out, Jim!"

A pair of heavy ornamental candlesticks stood atop the bank of shelves. Wycoff's outflung hand had found one of these and he snatched it up, brought it swinging forward. The Ranger tried to throw himself out of the way of it, and did avert the skull-crushing blow to the head that the man intended. Instead it struck his neck where it joined the shoulder, with numbing force, and drove him to his knees.

In a buzzing fog he crouched there, shaking his head to clear it. Then he looked up, hunting his enemy. And saw Wycoff at the window, tearing the curtains aside, one leg thrown across the sill to risk the dangerous drop to the ground below. Hatfield lunged to his feet and staggered forward, gritting out:

"No, you don't! You don't cheat the law by breaking your neck!"

Wycoff tried to ward him off but Hatfield knocked his arm aside, grabbed his coat collar and pulled him bodily backward into the room. A twist and shove sent the man tottering into a chair. He sprawled there, his usual immaculateness gone, eyes in a bloody face staring at the gun Jim Hatfield held leveled upon him.

Rubbing his aching shoulder, the Ranger told him, "You're finished, Matt! The law has got everything it needs against you, including your admission that you killed Zack Bonniwell! So, you can just sit there a while and think about what lies ahead of you."

Turning away, but still keeping the man covered, he looked at Anita who cried, "You're all right, Jim?"

"Sure," he said. "But how about this

young lady? Can you find a knife or something to cut her loose?"

At once Anita remembered where she had seen a knife, then she was at Ruth Bonniwell's side, stripping the ropes that bound her, helping her to her feet. In the sudden aftermath of rescue, the strength and courage that had carried the girl so long broke down. She clung to Anita, trembling and crying.

"It's all right now," Anita comforted her. "They won't harm you."

"I know." Ruth pulled herself together, put the hair from her wan face with a trembling hand. "I'm sorry to go to pieces—when it's all over!"

Anita said, "Don't think about it! Just try to forget it all, that it ever happened." Across the girl's dark head she nodded to Jim Hatfield, who stood watching anxiously. "Nothing to worry about. It's just the shock of being rescued. She's been going on nerve, and now—"

"Sure," said the Ranger.

Without forgetting Matt Wycoff who seemed, however, completely beaten and without any treachery or fight left in him, Hatfield stepped to the window and had a look into the yard below. There had been shooting, but it was finished now. Bobbing lanterns and shuttling shadows filled the yard, as the men from Caprock moved methodically through the buildings of the ranch digging out the last remnants of Wycoff's beaten crew. Hatfield saw more than one still shape that he knew to be a dead man. He lifted a shout down through the window, calling Dave Fox's name.

AT ONCE other voices took it up, relaying it across the busy yard. And the stubby figure of the freighter was running toward the house, then, and calling up to the man in the window:

"Jim? Did we make it in time? I was afraid, when we heard that shooting—"

"You done just fine," Hatfield answered. "Everything's taken care of. When you've got a minute, come on up."

"Right with you!"

Minutes later, his feet were running up the steps and he burst into the study, big O'Fallon hard after him. They had seen Peso Vaught, lying dead on the stairway, and here was Matt Wycoff himself, a prisoner under Jim Hatfield's own gun. Dave Fox had a smoking six-shooter in his hand but he reholstered it.

"I guess that does it!" he exclaimed. "A clean sweep, for sure! And a new day for honest freighters in the Panhandle—thanks to you, Jim Hatfield!"

The Lone Wolf shrugged this aside. "Dave," he said, "here's someone who's anxious to see you."

Fox followed his gesture, then saw the black-haired girl beside the desk. "Mr. Hatfield has been telling me," Ruth Bonniwell began, hesitantly, "that it was entirely because of you that he was able to find me. I don't know how to say—"

The young man could only shake his head, seemingly tongue-tied. "You don't —have to say anything!" he blurted. "It's enough that I can look at you standing there, and know that you actually are real, and not just a beautiful picture I made up out of my own head, that day at Cottonwood Station!"

Smiling, she held out her hand, color freshening her wan face and reviving its beauty. Dave Fox went to her and took the hand in both of his, wearing the look of a man who has glimpsed a treasure, and lost it, and finally regained it.

Jim Hatfield glanced at Anita then, and his sunny smile broke over his face, softening and glorifying, making fairly handsome his tired, powder-grimed features. "I don't reckon we're needed here any longer," he told her. "These folks have got a lot of things to talk over, likely about a merging of the two Caprock freight lines. Let's leave 'em with it. O'Fallon, if it's all right, I'll turn my prisoner over to you, for the time being."

"Sure thing, Mr. Hatfield!" said red-faced Mike O'Fallon, with a grin.

As he moved to haul Matt Wycoff unresisting to his feet, Jim Hatfield took Anita's arm and the Ranger and the girl went down through the quiet house together, and into the soft Texas night. •

Double Dick Follows a Star

by Lee Priestley

It wasn't exactly a peaceful Christmas— but for Double Dick it was one to remember!

DOUBLE Dick Richards twisted his old neck inside the collar Nancy Belle had made him wear and squirmed against the hard pew of the Desert City Community Church. When his wedged-in neighbors glared, he subsided, white beard wagging miserably.

Nancy Belle, his grand-niece had insisted that he come. She thought Single Jack, the burro, drafted for the Nativity scene in the Sunday School program, needed his master there to keep a stern eye upon him.

The burro stood stolidly where they'd

arranged him, shifting from one hoof to the other, twitching patches of his dun-colored hide and sneaking wisps of hay from the manger. If the hay held out. . . . Double Dick's attention shifted to the stage to watch a black-eyed girl with a tilted nose and a sweet mouth marshalling the infant class into a wavering row. Their tuneless piping voices began:

"We three kings of Orient are,
. . . bearing gifts . . . following
yonder star. . . ."

Double Dick was not the only one who found Soledad Moreau good to look upon. At the end of the pew Lucky Lucero sat forward to see better. Leaning across the people between them, Double Dick stretched a leg to prod Lucky with a boot toe slicked up with lamp black and lard.

Lucky was as good a pardner as a man ever had, full of laughs and vinegar, with a Spanish brand of cow savvy reaching back to the first Lucero who had followed Juan Onate into New Mexico. But Double Dick was getting outdone with Lucky. He'd paraded plenty of pretty little heifers past Lucky but the boy hadn't seen fit to dab his loop on any of them.

Lucky could do worse than to pick Soledad, Frenchy Moreau's granddaughter. Called Leda for short, she was pretty and full of spunk and had a way with younguns, too. Double Dick had known Frenchy at Silver Valley in the Bridal Chamber Mine. One day Frenchy had pulled out with two mule loads of silver heading home to his place on the edge of the White Sands. Months later a freighter came across Frenchy's skeleton, dug up by coyotes, but the silver wasn't with him. So Leda had taught school and was slowly paying on the mortgage Ten Percent Peters held on the place at Frenchy's Wells.

Red climbed the back of Double Dick's neck as he thought about it. Ten Percent Peters was waitin' under the Chrismas tree to play Santy Claus. . . . Santy Claus! When the old skinfiint would grab Leda's place the minute she missed a payment.

On the other side of Double Dick, Louis Dubois watched Leda, too. Louis, a footloose descendant of a French mountain man of Taos, eyed the girl as a cat watches a mouse. . . . As if the thought of cats had evoked him, Double Dick saw a movement in the glittering, candlelit Christmas tree. Catastrophe, his lynx-gray cat, stretched over a limb to bat a dangling ornament. Then he rolled over, tangling himself ecstatically in a strand of tinsel. The tree swayed as the big cat slipped, then snagged a branch with a black paw to scramble back.

Santy Claus, waiting half out of sight in the entry, made shooing motions which Catastrophe ignored. Reaching out, the cat batted another ornament and leaned over fascinated to watch it fall and break in tinkling shards. He batted another ornament, and another. Fragile crashes punctuated the carol by Leda's infant class.

Santy Claus edged under the tree and yanked the cat's dangling black-ringed tail. Double Dick tramped on feet getting out of the pew, knowing the sure outcome of the tail pulling. But he was too late. Catastrophe overtook Santy Claus—in more ways than one!

The cat's first indignant leap landed him square on Santy's head. Yowling and spitting, Catastrophe struggled with Santy's red cap. The cap went sailing; the white wig beneath followed. Another backward and forward scrape dislodged Ten Percent Peter's toupee. The next swept a low branch clear of lighted candles.

When the candles cascaded down Peter's back, Double Dick blew a piercing whistle through his thumbs. The burro flopped his long ears forward, then leaped over the manger. When the cat dropped on his back, Single Jack lashed out with sharp black heels. Caught in the midriff, Santy Claus made an out-of-season pinwheel, whirling and throwing off sparks. . . .

OUTSIDE the desert night was sharply cold. Double Dick sighted along a brilliant star that hung over the ghostly

dunes of the White Sands. As he whacked the burro into more speed, he heard the piping voices of the demoralized infant class behind him:

"We three kings of Orient are,
. . . bearing gifts . . . following
yonder star."

The dunes kept off the wind but the moisture permeating the gypsum of which the White Sands were composed struck through to Double Dick's rheumatic bones. Groaning, he turned over. Looked like morning would never come. If the dern cat had behaved, he'd be sleepin' in a soft bed and a dry house, with nothin' on his mind but how much turkey and mince pie it was safe to stow away if you'd lived mostly on beans and sourdough for eighty years. If Catastrophe, the cat, didn't catch somethin', their Christmas dinner would be a drink of alky water out of nearby Frenchy's Wells.

He heard the pouncing, scuffling noises then . . . a choked-off gobble that made his white beard stiffen. Apaches? The warrior's gobble? It couldn't be. Apaches were peaceful farmers now. If they were off the reservation they wouldn't prowl at night, the time of their ghosts and spirits.

Something moved on the crest of the dunes. Double Dick loosened the heavy Navy Colts he wore, keeping his eyes on the grease-wood that cast a tracery of shadow by the light of the waning moon. Feathers! Again that choked-off gobble!

In a flurry of sand and flapping wings, Catastrophe the cat slid down the dune, half-dragging, half-herding a turkey many times his own size. When the cat relaxed his grip on the turkey's neck the gobbling sound quavered through the silence.

Double Dick sat up indignantly. "Scare the daylights outa me fetchin' in a little ole turkey!"

The cat looked at him reproachfully through a rakish fringe of feathers.

"Well, all right! It's a fair-sized bird," Double Dick conceded. He appraised the white-feathered, domesticated fowl. "Maybe it's as big a wild turkey as I ever seen. Oughta make a good Christmas dinner . . ."

"That's what I thought when I penned that gobbler up," said a voice behind him.

. . . for Leda and us," the old man went on smoothly. "We'll dress this turkey we . . . found . . . and take it to her. Likely she'll ask us to pull out a chair and stay to dinner on account of we was old friends with her grandpappy." Then he made an elaborate show of discovering the girl who eyed him grimly over a shotgun. "Why, *hello,* Leda! I was just atalkin' about you! You're out huntin' early. But you needn't go on further. This here bird me and Catastrophe . . . found . . . is big enough to make Christmas dinner for a dozen!"

Leda stared at him. "Why, you mendacious old prevaricator!"

Double Dick wondered if it paid to educate women. If those tongue-wearyin' words meant what he was afraid they did. . . .

LEDA'S pretty lips curled into laughter despite her efforts to remain stern. "You couldn't be anybody but Double Dick Richards," she said. "I'll ask you to help eat this 'wild' turkey your cat 'found' in a coop in my yard just because of what happened to Ten Percent Peters last night." Leda giggled at the memory.

Double Dick clapped on his hat, stamped into his boots, and piled the bed roll on the burro's back. Then he took the limp turkey away from the cat. He whacked the burro into languid movement and said to Leda.

"Lead the way, honey. Say, was you figgerin' to have mince pie for dinner?"

"From my mother who was a Viremontes I learned to make very good *empanadas,*" Leda said.

"Them little, scallopy, fried things? Them'll do," Double Dick said. "They're just Mexican-style mince pies."

As they plodded through the sands, the gray dimness brightened to dawn. The

rising sun gilded the dunes in a moment of golden glory, then intensified their whiteness to a glittering blaze that blinded the eye.

It was Leda who asked Double Dick about her grandfather's murder and the lost muleloads of silver from the fabulous Bridal Chamber Mine.

"If you mean real court-of-law-evidence," Double Dick said, "I don't know nothin'. But hearsay now, I got plenty of. It stood to reason some of the Lake Valley bunch waylaid Frenchy, for they knowed where he was goin' and what he took with him. That Bridal Chamber ore was near pure mint." Double Dick stirred the burro to a faster amble. "So either Bill Grumbles, or Hank Blevins, or Taos Frenchy, or Mex Romero, or Pat Dublin, or me, killed your grandpa. And stole the silver."

Leda looked startled. "Or you?"

"Sure. I had the same chance as the others. You'll have to take my word for it I didn't drygulch Frenchy," Double Dick told her. "But I've always wondered what become of that silver. No minin' man could come into money . . . no matter how he got it . . . and not whoop it off with enough racket to be heard for miles both sides of the Border. But nobody never heard nothin'. Them two muleloads of silver made no noise whatsoever."

THEY had reached the crest of the dunes above a little cove and could look down on Frenchy's Wells. At the edge of the gypsum dunes, Leda's home was an actual oasis in the desert, green with alfalfa and musical with windmills and gushing water.

"Like the feller says, that there's a sight for sore eyes," Double Dick said. "It's a plum purty little place, Leda, and I sure hope you can keep Ten Percent's sticky fingers off'n it."

"I can't meet the interest payment that comes due tomorrow," Leda said. "And Ten Percent Peters knows I can't."

As they slip-slid down the crest of the dunes, Double Dick stumbled over a board, weathered and wind scoured. The silvery wood was bare, but the shape was suggestive. "Hey, ain't that a headboard off'n a grave?" he asked in surprise.

"Probably." Leda pointed. "See, there are several graves there and probably others that have been covered by the moving sands."

"A family deal, huh?" Double Dick stared curiously at the forlorn little burial place, powdered with a glittering crust of gypsum and threatened by the dunes marching slowly but inexorably across the desert basin.

"No, it isn't family except for Grandpa Frenchy," Leda said. "Once this was a station on the stage route from Lincoln to Tularosa. People got killed in various ways and they buried them here when they didn't know what else to do."

"Kind of a sample-size Boot Hill," Double Dick said. "Well, I reckon it won't bother them none if the sands cover them deeper. You got company, Leda."

Across the alfalfa fields, they saw a horse standing at the tie rack in front of the ranch house. A man rose from the bench beside the door as they slid down the last dune.

The man was Louis DuBois, the footloose descendant of a Taos mountain man who had followed the beaver from St. Louis to the Rockies in the great days of the fur trade . . . the same Louis who had watched Leda as a cat watches a mouse at the Sunday School program. Louis' hair was curly and his length was lean. His handsome face sparkled with a Gallic gaiety. But Double Dick noticed that his smile did not reach his eyes.

"You want I should send that jasper packin?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"On Christmas Day?" Leda shook her head admonishingly.

"Likely won't be enough turkey to go around," Double Dick complained, gesturing with the twenty-pound bird he carried. "I'm partial to white meat."

"Me, too, Grandpop." Louis' white teeth flashed in a grin as he held up a dressed turkey and a bottle of Mesilla wine. "If I may join you, Miss Leda?"

"Always be leary of jaspers fetchin' presents," Double Dick growled.

Seeing Louis shining around Leda almost spoiled Double Dick's appetite for Christmas dinner. He was able to down only three helpings of turkey with all the trimmings and to eat four *empanadas*, the fragrant Mexican version of mince pie. He kept thinking Lucky ought to be giving Louis some competition.

The shadow of the poplars had almost reached the dunes that threatened the grim little cemetery when Double Dick left Louis and Leda washing the dishes and stalked outside. He prowled idly, puzzling out inscriptions on the weathered and leaning headboards still in place. "Unknown Traveler—Caught by Apaches;" "John Doe—Slow on the Draw;" "Tex Maurey—He Throwed a Wide Loop". . . . Here was Frenchy Moreau's grave, farther away from the encroaching sands, its headboard straight and neatly set about with stones.

Double Dick scuffed in the drifted sand that had covered two graves almost entirely. The sands moved maybe an inch a year . . . those graves had been dug around forty years ago about the same time Frenchy was killed.

Unaccountably, Double Dick felt like uncovering those anonymous graves. Nobody deserved to be blotted out of all knowledge, to be swallowed up by the ocean of sandy waves. He scooped the sand away with his gnarled hands until he uncovered the headboard, long since leveled. Then he used the board for a scoop. It did not take long, for the sand was still shallowly drifted.

He was beginning on the second grave when Louis sauntered up. "Hey, Grandpop, you planning some body snatching?"

Double Dick snorted and kept on shoveling. When he found the second headboard, he laid it beside the first and went on with his task.

He picked up the two headboards then and tried to decipher the inscriptions on them. But only a faint denting remained. Louis could probably make out what had been on the boards. His eyes were considerably younger. But durned if he'd ask him! Double Dick looked at his boots, blacked with a mixture of lamp chimney soot and lard before the Sunday School celebration. If the sand hadn't scoured it all off . . .

HE RUBBED the bleached board across the blacking on the top of a boot. As the wood darkened, the indentations remained the same, but grew steadily more readable. Curiosity brought Louis over as the words emerged.

There was no date on the first board and only four words: "Here Lies Beau Coo." The second headboard was only slightly less brief. It read: "Rest in Peace, Dar Gent."

Double Dick scratched his chin through the beard. "I knowed every human bein' and horny toad in the Territory forty years ago. But I never heard no crazy names like them." He read aloud, " 'Beau Coo . . . Dar Gent' . . ."

"Name of a name!" Louis muttered, half under his breath, as he leaped.

Before Double Dick could turn, one of the headboards smashed over his head. The green oasis of Frenchy's Wells and the grim burying ground winked out along with his consciousness . . .

Double Dick tried fretfully to blow out the lamp shining in his face. He couldn't seem to get his arms up to shield his throbbing eyes from it. He tried to yell for someone to come move the blasted glittery thing, but he couldn't make a sound. He flounced sidewise and crashed to the floor with a thump that rattled his back teeth.

Fully conscious then, Double Dick sunfished amid the fragments of a kitchen chair on the floor of Leda's kitchen, his hands bound, and his mouth gagged with something that tasted of Christmas dinner. The glitter that had dazzled him was the last rays of the sun shining into the mirror above the wash stand. As he looked into the glass he saw Leda behind him, bound and gagged in her rocker.

He fought his bonds without result. The rope that held him to the chair back

had loosened when the chair broke, but his wrists and ankles were tied with short cords. In the mirror he saw that his gag was a turkey drumstick held between his teeth by one of Leda's dish towels.

Leda's eyes were black pools of fright as her gaze met his in the mirror. Double Dick tried hard to make reassuring sounds around the drumstick. The result was a muffled gobble not unlike that the turkey had made when alive.

And the sound brought Catastrophe, the cat, to the high and open kitchen window. Catastrophe felt abused. He had caught the turkey that had smelled so mouthwatering in the oven and on the table. But no one had fed him. So it was time a cat fended for himself. He dropped lightly from the window sill. He stared for a moment at the two humans bundled so strangely. But they only kicked feebly and repeated the gobbling noise. Catastrophe leaped to the kitchen table, then sniffed cautiously around the hot stove seeking the turkey of which the kitchen was still reminiscent.

He found nothing in the wake of Leda's cleaning, but the turkey scent was tantalizingly strong around Double Dick. The cat crept closer. Then he ventured to pull a bit of meat from the end of the drumstick in Double Dick's mouth. Violently wiggled nose and batting eyes did no harm to a hungry cat and neither did drumming heels and the gobbling sounds.

Then Double Dick had an idea. He bent his head low and lifted his hands high until he could smear and rub his wrists with the turkey bone. He rubbed hard to get slivers of meat around the cord. Maybe the cat would chew it . . . The cat obliged.

Later, somewhat lacerated of wrists but free, Double Dick yanked the tea towel from his face and tossed the worn drumstick to Catastrophe. Then he freed Leda. As they hobbled to get blood circulating in their legs again, the twilight deepened to dusk.

"That durn Louis did it," Double Dick growled. "But why?"

"He was excited . . . like he'd found a fortune," Leda said. "He had to talk. He said the headboard proved the letter was right. What did he mean?"

Double Dick shrugged, mystified. "What did he mean crackin' me over the head when I read the marker?"

"What marker?"

Double Dick told her about uncovering the two graves and finding the markers born down by sand. "I can't see nothin' there. Just two outlandish names. One was 'Beau Coo' and the other was 'Dar Gent'."

Leda repeated after him, "Beau Coo . . . Dar Gent." Then sudden comprehension came to her. "*Beaucoup d'argent*! That's it! Oh, hurry, Double Dick, hurry! Or he'll have the graves opened and carry it all away!"

Double Dick goggled at her. "You think Louis is body snatchin'?"

"You said yourself it was queer that the two mule loads of silver made no noise getting spent. They weren't spent. Grandpa hid the silver before he was killed!"

"Hid the silver hisself? Where?"

Leda hopped with excitement. "In those two 'graves'! He put up headboards to make the 'graves' look right with names that hinted to anyone who knew French. *Beaucoup d'argent* means 'plenty of silver'! The letter Louis mentioned must have told him the murderers never found the silver. So he came looking for it. Oh, hurry, Double Dick!"

DOUBLE DICK hurried. He heard the scrape of Louis' digging before he reached the little graveyard. Louis had opened one grave and emptied it of rawhide ore bags. As Double Dick peered from the deep shadow of the nearest dune, Louis lifted sacks from the second hole. He had just finished when Double Dick spotted his own cane, kicked aside from the scuffed place where Louis had hit him with the headboard.

When Louis lifted himself from the hole, Double Dick was upon him. Thrust-

ing hard, he poked the breath out of the man's lungs. As Louis fell back gasping, Double Dick whacked him over the head. Then the old man clambered to the crest of the dune that threatened the little graveyard. Using the headboard for a shovel again, he scopped the cold white sand. The steeply undercut face began to slide, then cascaded to overwhelm Louis in the hole that was like an open grave.

"That'll hold you for a while, you silver stealin' grandson of a murderin' thief!" Double Dick growled.

Double Dick and Leda were admiring the contents of the buckskin bags when footsteps clacked on the porch.

Following his knock right into the kitchen, Ten Percent Peters explained his call. "I was passing this way, Miss Leda, so I thought you'd be glad to oblige with the interest due on your mortgage today and save me another trip—"

"Why you dad-burned orphan robber!" Double Dick roared. "You konw good and well today's a legal holiday and no money comes due!"

"I won't press you before tomorrow, of course," Ten Percent Peters said smoothly but with a glare for Dick.

The steps on the porch that time were Lucky's. He doffed his flat-crowned sombrero, the lamplight shining on his curly hair and his smile making his handsome face winning. "I thought you might have seen my lost partner, Ma'am. He's *no bueno por nada*, a good-for-nothing, but I'm fond of him—"

"All them Luceros is too smart for one feller and not smart enough for two," Double Dick growled.

Peters saw the silver then. He eyed the pile of buckskin bags as Leda told the story of the two graves that were not graves at all. Plainly he decided that a paid-up mortgage would compensate him for failure to secure Frenchy's Wells. "Isn't it a concidence that I have the mortgage right here with me? I'll turn it over to you for say . . . two of those ore bags."

"Two thousand dollars worth of silver to settle a two hundred dollar debt!" Double Dick's cane leaped to his hand like the lethal weapon it was. "Why, you—"

Ten Percent Peters retreated, wagging the handful of mortgage. "Don't you touch me, you goat-whiskered old reprobate! I can have the law on you right now, for what that vicious animal did to me when you sicked him on me—"

There is a point where retreat becomes a rout. Ten Percent Peters trod upon the cat and that point was reached. Catastrophe had sat brooding on the forgetfulness of human folk who denied a cat his share of Christmas turkey. He flew at the feet and ankles that had stepped upon him. He bit and clawed, yowling and spitting. The attacked banker hopped and screeched, kicking at the cat with the same success he would have enjoyed if it had been a buzz saw.

The mortgage skidded across the kitchen floor to Double Dick's feet. Thoughtfully he picked it up and then lifted a stove lid. He laid the folded paper on the glowing coals and set the lid back.

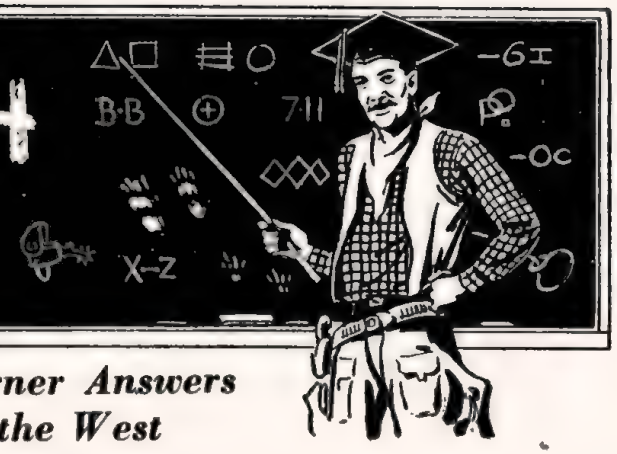
Dodging the busy cat and the howling man, Double Dick went out on the porch. He could trust Lucky to handle Louis and to take care of Leda. Single Jack, the burro bobbed his ears at the corner. When the old man whistled, the cat flashed through the open door and leaped to the burro's back.

Low in the sky a single star glittered over the ghostly dunes. Sighting along it, Double Dick turned away from Frenchy's Wells into the wastes of the White Sands. He thought about the white mice that featherstitched the remote dunes with their tiny tracks. Catastrophe deserved a good night's hunting.

Slogging through the gypsum hillocks, the old man began to sing, his cracked voice quavering through the minors of the infant class' carol:

" . . . bearing gifts we travel afar-r-r,
Field and fountain, moor and
mountain,
Follerin' yonder star . . . "

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—I have read somewhere that movie star Greer Garson owns a ranch and raises some sort of peculiar cattle. If so, where and what kind of cattle?—L.B.A. (Nebr.)

A.—Greer Garson and her husband, Buddy Fogelson, own the Forked Lightning Ranch on the Pecos River just over the mountain from where I live here in New Mexico. They raise white shorthorn cattle —a Scottish breed, I believe.

Q.—I am a great admirer of Charley Russell's paintings of cowboy life. Are there any cowboy artists living today whose work compares with his?—C.L.C. (Wyo.)

A.—That would be a matter of opinion. Harold Bugbee and H. C. Bennie of Texas, Peter Hurd and Tom Lea of New Mexico and C. Lorenz of Colorado are all mighty fine painters of cowboy life, and I expect there are others I don't know so much about.

Q.—Do most modern cowboys roll their own or smoke tailor-mades?—Adele (N.Y.C.)

A.—No statistics on this, but my own observation indicates that there are still probably more cowboys who roll their own than there are who smoke tailor-mades out on the cow work, though a lot of them may take to store cigarettes when in town.

Q.—Who was Billy Breakenridge?—F.G. (Ohio).

A.—Col. Wm. E. (Billy) Breakenridge was an early day law officer of Arizona whose good sense and courage did a lot toward cleaning up cattle rustling and outlawry in Cochise County.

Q.—What is the inscription that was cut upon the headstone over the grave of the Outlaw Sam Bass—something about "brave men and true"?—W.H.R. (Mont.)

A.—"A brave man reposes here. Why was he not true?"

Q.—I saw a western book the other day by "Luke Short". I thought Luke Short was an oldtime western gunfighter. Is this story writer his son?—N.S.T. (Kans.)

A.—Luke Short *was* an oldtime western gunfighter and the writer you refer to is not his son, but a man of another name who has merely taken "Luke Short" as his pen-name.

Q.—Is it true that the State of Texas owns its own cattle brands?—D.B.B. (Pa.)

A.—Yes. A star is branded on livestock raised on State Penitentiary farms and ranches where the work is done by convicts.

Q.—I know there are cowboy dude ranches here in the East nowadays, but have also heard that there are some pretty big cattle ranches in Pennsylvania. Is this true?—Pop (N.Y.)

A.—I understand that the big King Ranch outfit of southern Texas has bought and consolidated some pretty extensive acreage in Pennsylvania—Bucks County, I think—where they put several thousand steers on grass for fattening every year. This is probably the "ranch" you've heard about.

Q.—I say that coyotes are wolves. My friend says they are foxes. Who is right?—Bud (R.I.)

A.—Though coyotes resemble wolves in some ways and foxes in some, actually they are small members of the wolf family and are often called "prairie wolves."

—*S. Omar Barker*

An Action Novelet

DEAD MAN'S

Rand Weston tries on a pair when he escapes from prison, sees a murder, and takes a hand in a land-grabbing game!

BOOTS

by Walker A. Tompkins

CHAPTER I

Canyon Fugitive

DEATH or capture were only minutes away now for this rider whose butternut ducking suit branded him as a fugitive from the Territorial Prison. The gelding couldn't last another mile, whereas the posse was fresh-mounted and inspired by the fierce zest that hunters know, even where the game it not a fellowman.

The beetling lava walls of the Rio Coyotero's gorge acted like mighty sounding boards, gathering and multiplying the hoofbeats behind Rand Weston until eight riders sounded like a cavalry regiment. The deceptive acoustics amplified all this cacophony until a man could not sort the reality from the echo. All Weston could be sure of was that his string was playing out fast.

Doom wouldn't be so hard to accept, if he were actually a killer. But the one man who knew he had been railroaded to Yuma on perjured evidence had died under yesterday's rock slide, the same rock slide which had given him this long-shot chance at freedom.

Weston had known he was entering a trap when he had put the stolen grulla into the canyon this morning; but there had been no alternative. The Red Butte sheriff, apparently forewarned by telegraph, had had his posse waiting at the outlet of Cascabel Pass.

Given another half-hour of darkness, Rand Weston might have slipped through that cordon of guns unseen. But a flaming sunrise had spotlighted him leaving the foothills, and the possemen couldn't mistake the prison garb he wore.

And so, knowing he was already in range of that converging phalanx of Winchesters, Weston had flung his horse

The Red Butte posse riders stormed around the narrow pass

recklessly down the steep ledge into the Coyotero's deeps, trusting to the overhang of the cliffs to keep the Red Butte possemen from outflanking him and gunning him down from the rimrocks.

There was no side gulch within fifty miles where a man, let alone a horse, could scramble out of this narrow, torturous notch. That was why the sheriff had led his men down the same ledge, bent on chasing Rand Weston down like a rabid wolf, knowing they had their prey where they wanted him. The lawmen had nothing to risk. The rifle scabbard under the fender of Weston's saddle was empty. And he hadn't lifted a six-gun since the Yuma warden had assigned him his number, 89-Y-2910, in lieu of a name.

YESTERDAY afternoon, Weston had been grubbing rocks with the penitentiary chain gang on the north slope of the Sierra Secos, gouging a new road to Pinalino. The powder monkey, an army engineer from Fort Grant, had misjudged a fuse and a premature blast had spilled an avalanche of granite boulders between Weston and the rest of the convict crew.

For a space of maybe two minutes, smoke and dust had obscured Weston from sight of the shotgun guards. The powder man had died under the rock slide. So had Wade McKnight, the fellow-convict who had killed the homesteader in Tonto Basin, a killing for which Weston had been likewise accused and sent up for life.

The powder man's grulla gelding was on picket near at hand. And Rand Weston had seized his heaven-sent opportunity to escape.

The guards would assume the horse had bolted. It would take hours to dig out the dead and establish the fact that a convict was missing. With luck, Weston had believed he could reach Mexico before the alarm got out.

But some alert guard, perhaps guessing rather than knowing, must have tapped the military wire and flashed a warning to Red Butte. At any rate, an eight-man posse had been waiting for Weston at the south end of the Pass, at daybreak.

Down here in the perpetual twilight of the canyon bottom, the punishing heat of the upper desert had not yet tempered the cool spray of the Coyotero, brawling whitely over the rocks. This canyon meandered its way like a snake's track into the Mexican cordilleras, beyond the reach of Arizona law. But the Border's near sanctuary was a full day's riding by this twisting route, and the posse would overtake him long before noon.

The canyon walls closed in to form a tight elbow bend ahead of Weston, forcing him to gig his jaded saddler into the swift current. The water was barely fetlock deep, but the tug of it was too much and the horse went down, so unexpectedly that Weston hardly had time to jerk his hobnailed brogans out of the oxbow stirrups and jump free.

With the water foaming about his ankles, Weston stood staring down at the half-submerged muzzle of the gelding, knowing it would never regain its feet. In minutes—twenty at the outside—the sheriff's riders would spot the empty-saddled horse blocking the stream, and know the rider could not be far ahead. They probably had shoot-on-sight orders, not knowing whether the escaped lifer was carrying the powder man's .45-70 Springfield or not.

Weston waded out of the current into a pool of slack water. The rataplan of steel-shod hoofs on rubble was a growing din in his ears, audible above the tympani thump of his pulses. He clambered listlessly out on the sandy bank which hugged the base of the scarp and stood there a moment, seeing his reflection dancing in the mud-rolled waters.

The face that looked back at him was a gaunt-cheeked skull, his jaw furred with a stubble of beard, his eyes burned slits in cadaverous sockets. The massive frame of him was evident, even under the loose-fitting penitentiary jumper and pants—the deep chest, narrowing midriff, and saddle-warped legs of a man who had spent most of his thirty-two years as a range rider.

Fourteen months of working on the rock piles at Yuma had added to the layers of horny callus which 'lass ropes had put on his palms. He was in prime physical condition; even without grub in his belly for twenty-four hours, Rand Weston knew he had the stamina to make those fifty miles to the Border. Time was the precious factor he didn't have.

Instinct sent him lurching along the sandy shelf that followed the curve of the canyon, leaving the deep imprint of his hobbed shoe soles plain for the posse to read in the spongy silt. Weston knew there was no hope of hiding out. The smooth volcanic walls were fluted and pitted by the erosion of eons, but those precipitous surfaces offered no rincon or ledge big enough to hide a lizard, let alone a six-foot man.

ROUNDING the curve of the canyon bed, he blinked as he stumbled into the white, hot flood of the first direct sunlight he had met since entering the notch three hours ago. There was a complex spiderweb tracery of shadow mottling the canyon floor, and Weston lifted his gaze to discover that he was standing directly beneath the sixty-foot trestle of a railway bridge.

It took his confused brain a few moments to orient himself, to realize that this was the Border & Overland spanning the Coyotero chasm on the Deming-to-Cochise division.

And then, as his red-rimmed eyes traced the lattice of bridgework to its piers kneeing the cliffs forty feet up, a surge of hope went through the fugitive like a narcotic.

The west face of the canyon was a slope of rough and broken rock, dislodged by the engineers who had blasted a cut through the rimrock in order to maintain their track gradiant. Those rocks offered precarious stepping-stones, a ladder by which a man could reach the floor of the desert up there, an unhoped-for avenue of escape from this canyon mantrap.

He thought dully, "A man might have a chance to hop a passing cattle train up there," and with all the futile zeal of a drowning man clutching at a wisp of straw, Rand Weston started pawing his way up the precipitous jumble of broken lava.

The sledge-hammer pound of his overtaxed heart was lost on the hunted man as he scrambled from boulder to boulder, clinging to projecting brush roots here, chinning himself over knife-edged layers of fractured stone there. Like a snake with a broken spine, he wriggled his way upward, spending the precious coin of time for hard-won inches of elevation.

He knew the acid taste of fear when loose rock gave way under his clawing fingers and clattered down to the creek, rocks stained with the red smears of his blood. But he fought on, an automaton now, his brain reeling with exhaustion.

He gained the base of the west pierhead, and got his throbbing arms around a solid twelve-by-twelve timber, bracing his Yuma brogans on outjutting knobs of rusty bolts. He had lifted himself forty feet, but the rimrock goal was still twenty impossible feet above him, as unattainable as the remotest star.

Needing rest, knowing over-exertion could cause him to faint and plummet to sure doom on the rocks below, Weston realized that time was fast running out on him. At any moment the Red Butte riders would come hammering around the elbow bend of the canyon behind him. Posse guns could pick him off like a sky-lined bug caught in the Gargantuan spiderweb of the trestle.

It was when he was summoning his spent forces to resume climbing the timbers that he felt a sudden tremor run through the bridge, a mounting wave of vibration and humming steel telegraphing to his befogged senses that a train was bearing down on the bridge overhead.

The inspiring thought went through him that the train would be moving at a relatively slow speed in crossing the bridge. He might have a fighting chance to grab the handrail of a passing boxcar if he could reach the right-of-way in time.

It was a foredoomed hope. He knew that when his ears caught the chuffing exhaust of a locomotive and, peering up through the webwork of timbers, saw the diamond-stacked engine roar out of the eastern gap in the rimrock.

The hot breath of the firebox passing overhead fanned Weston's upturned face as he clung desperately to the trembling beams. A hot clinker caromed off his shoulder and he averted his face, to watch the sweeping shadows of a string of baggage cars and day coaches blot across the silver flashings of the river below him. The west-bound Phoenix Express.

SHATTERED hope wilted the fugitive's muscles as he cranked his head up for a glimpse of the rearmost car gliding over the rails above him, one flat wheel clattering over rail joints like the blows of Thor's hammer and Rand Weston witnessed tragedy being enacted on the rear platform of the vanishing train!

He had a pinched-off glimpse of two men grappling on that iron-railed platform, then a Stetson-hatted figure being shoved off the steps into space. Like something in a nightmare, too horrific to register fully on his comprehension until afterward.

Weston saw the hurtling body carom off a red fire barrel on a jutting platform of the bridge overhead. Momentum hurled the cartwheeling body against the sheer rock wall of the canyon with a crunching impact which was soundless under the overall roar of the departing train.

Weston's last coherent mental image of that vanishing car platform was of a face remembered only for its ferret-tail mustache and a thick torso clothed in a red and black Rob Roy-patterned shirt. Then the killer was blotted out behind a swirl of tumbling smoke and steam, drawn into the western cut by the suction of the train's passage.

Weston forced himself to look down into the gorge, expecting to see the shattered, broken corpse strike the water. But he saw nothing save his own footprints tracking across the sand.

Sick with the horror of it, Weston lifted his eyes along the slope of talus he had lately climbed, and saw the dead man. The corpse had lodged on a narrow outjut of rock, its plunge arrested by cushioning *agarita* brush which had taken precarious root there.

The death plunge had ended directly level with the place where Weston clung to the base of the trestle pier, so near that he could see the slow seep of bright blood oozing from the man's nose and mouth.

"Somebody pitched him overboard—aiming to dump him into the river!"

CHAPTER II

Tin Star

IN THE heavy, unnatural silence following the train's departure, his own words sounded strangely loud in Weston's ears.

He knew he should resume climbing, take advantage of what precious minutes remained before the trailing posse rounded the canyon bend a hundred yards upstream. But, instead, Weston found himself staring at the dead man as if in the grip of a paralyzing trance.

The man had been a cowpuncher, to judge from his spurred Coffeyvilles, his brush-scuffed batwing chaps, and the spotted calf-hide vest covering his hickory shirt. His sombrero had blown off when he had struck the fire barrel, and had lodged in a fissure of the rimrock above the body. It was a gray beaver Stetson with rawhide lacing on the brim, and a flat crown that showed the ingrained soda stains of the cactus country.

"About my build," the thought raced through Weston's head. "It might work—if there's time enough left."

New energy seethed through him as he worked his way from the bridge timbers to the ledge and snaked on his belly to the clump of *agaritas* where the dead man

was sprawled. Coming up, he saw that the man had died of a broken neck; he could judge that by the unnatural angle of the head rolling limply from wide shoulders. The dead man wore a cartridge-filled belt and a Colt .44 that was still intact in a basket-woven holster.

The thought of what he must do sickened Rand Weston, but he forced himself to strip the corpse to its underwear and socks. Then, working feverishly in the scant cover of the yellow-blooming chaparral, the fugitive shucked off his own hated prison garb and accomplished the ghoulish operation of clothing the dead man in his telltale ducking jumper and pants. The hobnailed brogans fit the dead man's feet snugly, telling him that this unknown cowhand's benchmade cowboots should fit him equally as well.

Weston's hands shook uncontrollably, delaying the job of lacing the Yuma brogans and tying them. He was hauling on the dead man's bibless levis and shrugging into the hickory shirt when he discovered the ball-pointed silver star pinned to the underside of the calfhide vest.

Blood had leaked on the badge and Weston rubbed it off on a tuft of dead grass. Etched lettering on the star gave him some scant clue to the identity of the dead man:

SOUTHWESTERN CATTLEMEN'S PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION

"A range detective," Weston muttered, tugging on the spike-heeled cowboots and following up with the man's chaps and double-buckled gun-belt. "I wonder—"

He broke off, hearing the muted sound of men's voices from close at hand, down-canyon. The sheriff from Red Butte had sighted his drowned grulla. Even now, around the shielding bend of those cliffs, the eight-man posse would be assembling, knowing their quarry was afoot and close ahead.

"Hate to do this, pardner," Weston muttered through clenched teeth as he pulled the dead lawman free of the entangling brush. "But you're past feeling the drop now—"

He gave the corpse a push and saw it flop like a grisly sack of raw bones down the rocky incline, to strike the edge of the river below with a geysering splash. It lay there in the blinding sunshine, arms outflung, boneless and loose-jointed; the hips and legs under water, the ruined face on the wet sand at river's edge.

Weston clawed his way into a fissure of the rock wall and hoisted himself up to where the stock detective's battered Stetson had lodged in the cleft of lava. It occurred to him that he was safer here than if he attempted to cross the skyline, and he lay back, relaxing, his lungs heaving like the loins of a sun-bathing lizard.

HIS HAND went instinctively to the rubber butt of the six-gun as he saw the Red Butte posse riders storm around the narrow bend of the river, horses kicking up great white sheets of spray.

He was well hidden here. To see him the law riders down below would have to peer through the saffron blooms of the *agarita* thicket, and the sun would be in their eyes.

Weston heard the vanguard riders cry out at sight of the dead man, saw the possemen rein up and swing from stirrups, talking in excited voices as they crowded in a ring around the shapeless form clad in the uniform of a Yuma convict.

Two deputies dragged the body free of the water and rolled it on its back, hunkering down to examine their find. The whole scene down there was grotesquely foreshorted by the perspective of this nearly-vertical angle of view.

"They could only have a general description of me," Weston thought. "My picture is on no bounty poster."

A tall, raw-boned man with a cinnamon-colored beard and apron-length *armitas* chaps came to his feet in the group, sunshine sparking off the tin badge pinned to his gallus strap. The Red Butte sheriff, most likely. His grave comment reached the ears of the man who crouched, spent and gasping, in the rocks above:

"Hunt's over, men. This brand stenciled acrost his shirt jibes with Weston's. Eighty-nine, two-nine-one-o."

A deputy glanced up at the bridge and drawled, "Must have tried climbing this trestle after his horse played out on him, and lost his footing. See anything of a rifle around here?"

Possemen moved to keep their overheated mounts from drinking too copiously of the Coyotero's alkaline waters. The sheriff attended to the chore of lifting the dead man to his own saddle and lashing the jack-knifed body in place with pigging strings.

"Might as well hit the grit, men. Take us till nigh onto sundown to reach town as it is."

Through the screening *agarita* foliage, Weston watched the manhunters mount and ride slowly in Indian file, back down the notch. He closed his eyes against the pressure of the sun's heat, and when he opened them again the canyon floor below was empty.

Weston pulled a great breath to the pit of his lungs and let it out slowly, savoring the first relaxation he had known in months. Across the chasm a *chachalaca* bird made its raucous outcry. A whiptail lizard shoved its coffin nose over the rock inches from Weston's face and did push-ups, its beady eyes regarding this alien creature with bright interest.

The fugitive shut his eyes again, intending to rest five minutes before climbing up to the tracks. A drowsy lethargy flowed through him, easing the intolerable tension he had known. Then he drifted off into a void where pain and fatigue and the need for flight had no meaning. He slept . . .

It was the swelling roar of a locomotive whistle that roused Rand Weston and brought him scrambling out of his rocky covert, momentarily unsure where he was or how he got there. Then he knew from the stiffness of his muscles and the fact that the sun had westered beyond the zenith that his intended five-minute doze had stretched into as many hours.

The oncoming train was approaching from the east, as yet hidden by the high shoulders of the cut. Gaining the level of the rimrock, Weston caught sight of a creosote vat and ricks of pine cross-ties stacked along the right-of-way. He reached the shelter of the woodpile and was safe from discovery by the engine crew when the rusty work locomotive rumbled by in a stench of hot oil and hissing steam. It was a cattle train, running empty.

THE SCREECH of brake shoes and the clanging bell told Weston that the train was going to halt on the west side of the bridge. From his angle of view he spotted the red disk of a switch a hundred yards beyond the cut. As he watched, the hoghead braked his engine to a halt with its pilot just short of the spur track. A brakeman swung out of the cab and went ahead to throw the switch.

In all probability this string of empty stock cars was consigned to the loading pens of some cowtown on the branch road. The spur veered south from the main line, and in that direction lay the Mexican border and Weston's objective.

Risking a look over the creosote vat, the fugitive saw that the caboose end of the halted train was out of sight around the curve across the bridge. Barring a possible backward glance by the engineer, Weston knew he could scramble undetected onto the rods under one of these cars and ride hobo fashion until the train made its next stop. That would obviate a two-day trek afoot to the Border.

He had never ridden the rods on a highballing freight, and he knew the risk of being mangled under the trucks if he lost his grip. But Lady Luck, for the second time today, smiled on Rand Weston. The sliding door of the nearest cattle car was not sealed. There would be no blind baggage for him.

Weston left the shelter of the stacked ties and crossed the cinder apron of the right-of-way. Levering open the door, he hauled himself inside just as the train started rolling.

He bellied down to the floor and

crawled through the rank-smelling hay and manure which crusted the planks until he reached the front end of the car. He heard the caboose end rumble off the Coyotero bridge and rattle over the switch frogs. The brakie reset the switch and the train began to pick up speed, after giving the crewman time to swing aboard the caboose.

Propping his back against the end of the car, Weston watched the bleak landscape of rolling dunes and cactus jungle wheel past the open slats of the car. The train was angling southwest. Summoning what he knew of the geography of this corner of the Territory, Weston guessed that this track led to Nogales on the Sonora border.

He settled back, not daring to sleep again. This was his first opportunity to explore the dead man's clothing he wore, and he turned to this as a means of keeping his mind occupied.

The chaps pockets contained a sack of Durham and brown papers, loose change, a jack-knife with the initials "B K" carved in the staghorn handle, and odds and ends of matches and cartridges. The levis netted even less clues to their owner's identity—a red bandanna and a brass check from a saloon in Taos, good for a beer.

Investigating a bulge on the inner side of the calfskin vest where the law badge was pinned, Weston located a wallet of handtooled Chihuahua leather. A ghoulish sense of unease washed through the man as he opened the wallet. He felt like a pickpocket.

The wallet contained over two hundred dollars in currency, a dog-eared letter, and an identification card bearing the insigne of the Southwestern Cattlemen's Protective Association.

Before investigating further, Weston shaped himself a smoke, lighted it. Then, bracing his shoulders against a corner of the jouncing car, he lifted the CPA card to the light.

Brett Kleveland, Socorro, New Mexico

That was the name of the stock detective whose corpse was now on its way to Red Butte, tied to a sheriff's horse. The card gave Kleveland's age as twenty-nine, his weight a hundred and ninety-eight. He had been slightly younger and considerably heavier than Weston.

"Socorro," mused the fugitive. "That is *bueno*. This Kleveland must have been on his way to Arizona on some assignment when that hombre pitched him into the canyon."

CHAPTER III

Dead Man's Mission

WESTON found himself wondering if Brett Kleveland had left a widow and children to grieve for him back in Socorro. Once he was safe in Mexico, he would see that the dead man's badge and wallet were mailed to his home address.

He examined the grimy envelope, noting that it was addressed to Kleveland from the home office of the Association in Santa Fe. The contents of the missive were no concern of Weston's and he hadn't enough curiosity to pry into the letter. He was returning it to the wallet when a sharp lurch of the train on the unballasted roadbed caused a rectangular metallic object to slip out of the envelope into his lap.

Picking it up, he saw that it was a tintype of a young woman.

Something about the girl's picture arrested Weston's attention. She was uncommonly beautiful, but her attraction went deeper than that. The camera had caught an indefinable something which made the girl seem vividly alive, not just a one-dimensional facsimile mirrored indelibly in silver. There was vitality in her eyes, a wistful quirk to her smiling lips which seemed to reach out and grip Rand Weston's emotions.

She was a brunette, to judge from the dark sheen of the hair which framed her face under a light-colored, cuffed-back Stetson. Her skin held the bloom of

youth, bronzed from outdoor living. She was dressed in a fringed buckskin shirt, waist overalls and spurred half-boots; but the ripe curves of her breasts made a tight swell against the beaded leather shirt.

"Kleveland's wife," Weston thought, "or his sweetheart. I hope she never learns how her man frayed out his string."

Even as he framed the words, Rand Weston realized that he held the key to the mystery of Brett Kleveland's finish. A hazy, half-remembered picture of a brutish, bearded face, a beefy chest clad in a red and black Rob Roy plaid shirt.

Kleveland's secret would never be revealed unless Weston chose to reveal it; his killer would certainly keep quiet. The Red Butte sheriff would probably turn Kleveland's remains over to a coroner and notify the warden at Yuma that Rand Weston, Convict Number 89-Y-2910, had been found dead by a pursuing posse.

Would the warden send a prison official out to identify the body? It was not likely. Corpses didn't keep at this season. And the evidence was too conclusive that the posse had found Rand Weston's corpse. There was no next of kin to claim the body.

In all probability Brett Kleveland, range detective, would be buried in Red Butte's Boot Hill. By the time his disappearance gave rise to an investigation by the CPA office, it would be too late to exhume the body for examination.

Weston glanced outside the car at the passing landscape. It was mid-afternoon and already he could see the blue mountain malpais of Mexico lifting above the heat haze to the south. Each passing minute brought him half a mile nearer the Border. The posse would still be north of the Border & Overland main line, skirting the east rim of the Coyotero gorge about now, homeward bound.

Weston found his attention drawn back to the girl's picture. It suddenly occurred to him that probably she was not anyone near and dear to the murdered Brett Kleveland. If she had been, why had the detective carried her tintype in a letter from headquarters?

That letter was probably impersonal. Could the tintype have accompanied it?

Rejecting a vague sense of guilt for invading the privacy of a dead man, Weston drew out the letter. After all, he aimed to return the tintype and the letter to its sender.

The letter was a single page in a woman's handwriting. Clipped to it was a pink memorandum bearing the printed letterhead of the Cattlemen's Association headquarters, on which was scribbled a few lines in a man's heavy hand:

Brett: The enclosed letter and picture, coming from the daughter of an Association member, will be self-explantory. Check into this and report the situation by code telegram.

E O G

WESTON turned his attention to the letter, which read:

Mr. E. O. Gurson, Pres.,
S. W. Cattlemen's Protective Assn.,
Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory.
Dear Mr. Gurson,

I appreciated your telegram notifying me that the facilities of the Association are available to members in cases such as the one I described in my letter of August 27th.

Since that writing, the local coroner and sheriff have blamed my father's killing on Mexicans he caught rustling Rafter S cattle across the Border. I have reason to believe this is not the case.

If you will assign an Association detective to this case, I will meet him on the date you specify and give him complete details. I would strongly urge that your investigator work under cover, perhaps posing as a cowhand on my payroll.

I suggest arranging a meeting at the hotel in Red Butte, the Oasis House, so as not to attract the suspicion of anyone in my crew who might be hostile to my cause. So that your investigator can identify me without having to make local inquiry, I am enclosing a recent picture of myself. I will be wearing the same clothing. I feel that the future of Rafter S and perhaps my own safety will depend upon your cooperation.

Sincerely yours,
(Miss) PETRA STOCKTON,
Rafter S Ranch,
Red Butte, Ariz. Terr.

Oblivious of the whirling desert landscape outside the stock car, Rand Weston pondered the mystery to which he had been assigned an oblique part by the

strange vagaries of the fate that ruled his stormy destinies.

Petra Stockton's secret had leaked out. Brett Kleveland, heading westward in answer to the girl's plea for help, had been killed by someone who had sought to keep an Association trouble-shooter from contacting this orphaned girl.

"It's no affair of mine," Weston told himself. "With a price on my head, I've got to look out for my own skin."

At dusk the cattle train rolled onto a siding at the outskirts of a cowtown settlement. When the locomotive was uncoupled to leave the cars alongside a long row of loading chutes and corrals filled with bawling cattle awaiting shipment to the slaughter-houses in Kansas, Rand Weston knew his ride was over.

Even as he alighted from the car and took shelter in the narrow chutes between the loading pens, he knew where he was. A massive red lava formation lifted its thousand-foot landmark over the surrounding sagebrush flats, blackly silhouetted against the burned-out sunset glare, and told him that this was Red Butte.

The name held a double connotation for Weston now. Red Butte was the destination of a lawman named Brett Kleveland who would be arriving here, stiff in death, with a sheriff's posse sometime later tonight. Red Butte was the mailing address of a girl Weston had never seen, a girl in desperate trouble who was depending on Brett Kleveland to solve the riddle of her father's bushwhacking and save her and her ranch from evil forces, the nature of which Weston could not even guess.

Leaving the cattle yards, Weston found himself in the Mexican quarter of town, judging by the adobe-walled *jacals* and the naked kids mingling with the mongrels and goats and chickens of the malodorous side streets.

He located a chili house and slaked his ravening hunger with tortilla cakes, peppery frijoles, and bitter Sonora coffee compounded out of chicory. His appetite sated, Weston located a barber shop catering to the peon trade and let his dinner settle while he got a much-needed shave.

"I'm lucky they don't shave convicts' heads at Yuma," he thought and six months on the road-building chain gang had erased any of the prison pallor a lifer might have picked up in the cell blocks.

WHEN he emerged from the *barbaria,* full dark had descended on the town. In the barber shop, Weston had listened to the *pelados* gossiping in Spanish about Sheriff Miles Millbride's current manhunt. Word had reached town yesterday concerning the escape of a Yuma convict from a road camp in the Sierra Secos, and Millbride, with a picked posse, had ridden north to apprehend the *fugitivo.* They would be back *esta noche.*

Weston planned to be gone long before Millbride's riders reached town with Kleveland's body. The money in the wallet would pay for a saddle and a headstall and a horse, and enough grub to get him to Arizpe, or maybe as far into Mexico as Hermosillo. From there on his future was a mystery.

The Border was only three miles south of this cowtown, but Weston meant to avoid the main road leading to Agua Prieta. Too much risk of having the port of entry authorities question a saddle bum without a transit permit. No matter. The Border was long and unfenced and the mounted patrols couldn't begin to cover the boundary. Morning would see Rand Weston well beyond the reach of gringo law.

Not that he expected pursuit. The odds were that Randolph T. Weston, Yuma inmate Number 89-Y-2910, would go into the books as a closed case. Accidental death while attempting escape, September 8, 1890, Rio Coyotero Canyon, Cochise County.

But he had to remember that somewhere in this town he might be spotted by an hombre with a ferret-tail mustache and a Rob Roy shirt—the killer who might recognize his victim's clothing and put two and two together when Mill-

bride's posse came back from Rio Coyotero Canyon with a dead man in a convict's suit. Yes, Mexico was the only sure bet.

He reached the main street to find it crowded with ranchers and their riders, come to celebrate the end of fall beef gather at the local honkytonks and deadfalls and back-street bagnios.

Weston turned west, curbing an impulse to help himself to any one of dozens of saddled ponies standing three-footed and hipshot at racks along the wooden curbs. Escaped convict he might be, but damned if he would use that excuse to turn horse thief.

The guttering oil flares on the false front of a gambling dive illuminated an adjacent livery barn. Over the black archway was a sign Weston had been looking for:

LIVESTOCK BOUGHT AND SOLD

He would strike a bargain for a horse there and be on his way to the Border within the hour.

Quartering across the street to avoid the lamplight of a saloon's window, he passed the Red Butte jailhouse, saw a jailer and a cowhand playing checkers in the sheriff's office.

"Waiting for Millbride's posse to get in with their cold meat," Weston thought. "I want to be out of here before then."

He had no particular cause to fear the sheriff. It was unlikely anyone in this town had ever crossed his trail up in the Tonto Basin country. Kleveland's killer was the only threat, and there was no proof that he was a Red Butte man.

Directly ahead Weston saw a two-story building with wooden-awninged porches flanking two sides, porches where men sat on benches, smoking and whittling, enjoying the cooling dusk. Painted across the colored glass panes of a dimly-lighted lobby window were the words:

OASIS HOUSE—ROOM AND BOARD

Oasis House. This was where Petra Stockton had a rendezvous with a man now dead, the man whose boots Rand Weston now filled. A girl orphaned by an owlhooter's bullet, waiting for a Cattle Association trouble-shooter who would wind up in Red Butte's graveyard with a Yuma lifer's name on his headboard. Ironic as hell, the way fate shuffled a man's cards.

HE WAS passing the broad front steps of the Oasis House when he saw her leaving the lobby. Even in the dim light, there could be no mistaking the girl in cream-colored Stetson and fringed buckskin blouse who was coming down the steps.

Petra Stockton was more striking in appearance than the tintype had depicted her. Her hair was not black; it was a rich coppery auburn. As Weston slowed down to keep from colliding with her, he caught the heady aroma of her hair and heard the quick, strained breathing which told him plainer than words the tensions which tortured this girl.

Passing in front of him, she glanced at him, and he could see the haunted look in her eyes. She gave him a full, lingering strike of her amber eyes, as she must have surveyed every tall stranger who had approached the hotel that day. Then she walked out to the hitch-bar and untied the reins of a steeldust gelding which bore a Rafter S brand on its rump.

Some force quite outside his own volition caused Weston to head toward the hitch-rack, as if his own mount was tied there.

Petra Stockton was hooking a tapaderoed stirrup over the dish-shaped horn of her Brazos stock saddle, preparatory to tightening the latigo.

Without haste, knowing he was under the casual scrutiny of the spit-and-whittle boys lining the hotel benches, Weston slouched over to the wooden curb and said in a low monotone: "Miss Stockton? I want to return your tintype."

He heard her indrawn breath, but she did not turn her head his way. Iron control, he thought appreciatively. Her whisper barely reached his ears: "Take the apaloosa on your right. Belongs to my cavvy wrangler. Meet me in ten minutes

at the watering trough at the edge of town."

CHAPTER IV

Pattern of a Killing

PETRA STOCKTON was in saddle at once, curveting the steeldust out into the powdry alkali of the street. She spurred into a lope, and was soon lost in the velvety night's distance. No onlooker, observing them from the hotel porch, could have guessed that any contact had been made between the Rafter S girl and this stranger.

He ducked under the tie bar and rolled a smoke, taking his time about it. Ten minutes, she had said. He unhitched the Rafter S apaloosa, thinking angrily, "How loco can a man get, tipping his hand for no reason? Risk my hide for a pretty face."

But he knew what had impelled him to approach Petra Stockton. The girl was alone and in desperate trouble, the nature of which Weston could only guess. Before he left Red Butte, he could at least find out if she knew a man who wore a Rob Roy shirt and had a mustache like ferret's tails.

In saddle, riding westward at a jog trot, Weston knew he should cut south at the first side street and line out for Mexico. This apaloosa was fresh, grain-fed, its speed and endurance evident to any man with half an eye for horseflesh. He could cover the three miles to the Border before Petra Stockton realized she had been hoodwinked by a cryptic word. Even then she would hardly report the theft of her wrangler's pony to Sheriff Millbride, having called in a CPA detective without his knowledge.

But Weston gave the apaloosa its head, cursing himself for ten kinds of a fool, and followed the street toward the loom of cottonwoods, around a water-hole which had been the genesis of this town.

The darkness was inpenetrable under the trees, but he heard the whickered greeting of Petra's steeldust as his pony made its way by old habit to the tanks and plunged its muzzle into the spilling waters. From the shadows he heard the girl speak:

"You can identify yourself, sir? So much is at stake."

Weston grunted noncommittally to let her know he had heard, and took from his pocket the envelope containing her own letter and tintype, Kleveland's identity card and silver badge. All he had to do was turn over these articles to the girl, tell her that Kleveland had met with foul play enroute to Red Butte, and describe the killer. That was all. Then be on his way. And leave Petra Stockton to unravel this dangerous business herself.

Instead he rode over to where the girl sat her saddle, handed her the bulky envelope and said, "Name's Kleveland, ma'am. Here's my pedigree."

He struck a match, giving her time to check his identification. Her exhalation of relief came through the following darkness.

"Thank heaven you got here, Mr. Kleveland. The wire from your headquarters said you would arrive on the noon stage that meets the Phoenix Express at Apache Junction. When I saw you weren't aboard the stage, I—"

He cut in, "You met the stage, knowing I was supposed to arrive incognito?"

Her expression was invisible in the clotted gloom, but Weston detected the surprise in her voice as she answered:

"I didn't actually meet the stage, but I could see who got out of it from the windows of Tom Sloan's office in the Oasis House. I knew both of the passengers—old Mrs. Murdock, and Dunc Tegner. So I was sure you had missed connections somewhere."

Her words set Rand Weston's heart to pounding. Assuming that Brett Kleveland's killer came from Red Butte, would he have returned on the Apache Junction stage after leaving the train? Probably, he told himself. Under ordinary circum-

stances, Kleveland's bones would have been scattered by vultures and coyotes before they would be found in the depths of Coyotero Canyon.

"Does this Dunc Tegner hombre wear a red and black checkered shirt, ma'am? A heavy-set galoot with a little ferret-tail mustache?"

"Why, yes, that describes him to a T. How would you know that? Mr. Gurson said he was sending a total stranger out here."

A SENSATION like chipped ice trickling down his back went through Weston. In so short a time he had learned the name of a killer. But where did this Tegner tie in with Petra Stockton?

"You'll want to know about my father's bushwhacking," she said, stirring restlessly in saddle. "It won't take long to tell, Mr. Kleveland. To begin at the beginning, Dad—"

He interrupted her quickly: "First off, ma'am, I'd like to know who this Dunc Tegner is and why he was on today's stage?"

"Tegner? Why, he's foreman on the Ringbone Ranch. Tom Sloan's ranch, neighboring the Rafter S on the west. I don't know why he happened to be out of town. Why do you want to know?"

This was not the time to break the news that Dunc Tegner had boarded the Phoenix Express for the purpose of killing the stock detective she had sent for. He had no intention of explaining what he was doing in a dead man's boots, working at a dead man's job.

"You mentioned a man named Sloan, Tegner's boss. Who is he?"

"Tom Sloan is our district attorney, Mr. Kleveland. He also happens to be the man I am engaged to marry."

A strange, ridiculous sense of disappointment stirred through Weston at this news. He went on, "Did you tell anyone —anyone at all—that I was coming to Red Butte?"

She curbed the prancing steeldust before answering. "Y-yes. Tom Sloan knew of my plans. It was he who—who was with my father when he was killed."

"Was Tom Sloan away from town with Tegner today?"

"No, he's been busy all this week, prosecuting a case in the courthouse. Tom doesn't run his ranch. He leaves that to Dunc Tegner. Tom's law practise keeps him tied down."

In the darkness, Rand Weston tugged at his lower lip thoughtfully, picking over the stray bits of information this girl had given him. He believed he was on the threshold of solving the killing of Petra's father, even before knowing the circumstances of Stockton's death.

"All right, ma'am," he said finally. "Go on with your story—the details you didn't tell Gurson in your letter."

He listened to her with only half his attention, his mind on more immediate things involving himself. The girl told her story haltingly, her grief still too fresh for her to relate the incidents of the tragedy dispassionately, objectively.

Colonel Jube Stockton, she explained, had been riding home with Tom Sloan one night, three weeks before, after a visit to town. They had heard cattle bawling in the distance, cattle being shoved south toward Mexico, presumably by raiders from across the Border.

Old Stockton had ridden out to investigate, against Tom Sloan's advice. A bushwhack shot had dumped Stockton out of saddle. At the risk of his own life, Tom Sloan had ridden out himself, after hearing the shooting, and had found Stockton's lifeless body on the sage flats. Morning revealed that fifty head of Rafter S feeders were missing, and the tracks of the rustlers were plainly visible on the prairie.

"Why do you doubt Sloan's version of the shooting?" Weston asked, when the girl finished speaking. "The evidence seems conclusive enough."

She said, "I believe Tom is lying—to protect me from the real truth. I think that someone, perhaps in my own bunkhouse, shot Dad. And I'll tell you why. Dad was almost blind. His night vision was next to zero. He was always too

proud to admit it, but I knew it. Mr. Kleveland, if Dad had thought rustlers were making off with our cattle, he wouldn't have ridden after them, after dark. He knew he couldn't hit the broadside of a barn at night. I think someone other than rustlers killed Dad—and I think Tom has guessed the same thing."

ANOTHER train of thought presented itself to Weston, he asked bluntly, "When are you and Sloan going to be married, ma'am?"

She hesitated. "Dad opposed our marriage. He never liked Tom. I don't know why. But he got me to promise to postpone my marriage until I was twenty-one —two years away."

"But now that your father's dead, you are no longer bound by that promise? And Sloan wants to rush this wedding?"

"Yes, that's how it stacks up. We applied for our license yesterday. Tom wants us to be married in the courthouse tomorrow. But I've about made up my mind to wait—until I find out the truth about my dad's death. I couldn't be happy otherwise."

Weston gathered up his reins. To him, a total outsider, the pattern seemed remarkably clear. Tom Sloan knew his fiancée had called for the Protective Association to help her locate Jube Stockton's killer. Sloan's foreman had waylaid Brett Kleveland, enroute to Red Butte. Once he was married to Petra, Tom Sloan would, to all intents and purposes, be the owner of the Rafter S Ranch, as well as the Ringbone.

"So you want me to hire on as a Rafter S cowhand and do some snooping around," Weston said brusquely.

She leaned toward him, the eagerness in her face visible from the remote lights of the town.

"Yes. I know it's perhaps asking the impossible, but I can't marry Tom until I know he had no connection with Dad's death. There! I hadn't intended to say it that bluntly, but—"

Weston reined the apaloosa alongside Petra's stirrup.

"I'd like to meet Sloan and Tegner before I ride out to the Rafter S. Could you arrange that?"

She nodded. "Of course. Right now—tonight—if you wish. Those cattle in the shipping pens are Tom's. He and Tegner are dickering with buyers from the Omaha packeries in Tom's office this evening. But you'll only ask Tom for his version of what happened the night Dad died, won't you? You won't repeat what I've told you?"

"Of course not, Miss Stockton. Let's ride."

The loafers were gone from the Oasis House porch when Petra and Rand Weston dismounted at the rack. Some excitement down the street had sucked a large crowd out of the cowtown's deadfalls, and when Weston saw that the throng had gathered in front of the Red Butte jail, he knew the reason back of it.

Sheriff Millbride's posse was back from their manhunt. Even at half a block's distance, Weston could see the saddle-gaunted riders sitting their horses, could see the crowd's morbid attention fixed on the dead man lashed to the sheriff's saddle.

He and Petra went directly into the hotel lobby and she led the way to a door opening on a front office room on the ground floor. There was a sign painted on the door:

T. W. SLOAN
Attorney-at-Law

Weston loosened his .45 in holster as he stood behind Petra, saw the girl knock on the door, then open it. Three men in town clothes and broad-rimmed boss Stetsons were seated before an empty desk, the room blue with accumulated cigar smoke. Dunc Tegner was not one of the three.

The men turned, caught sight of Petra and came to their feet, dragging off their hats. Anticlimax rushed through Weston's taut frame as he heard Petra ask:

"Mr. Sloan isn't here?"

One of the men shook his head. "We're stock buyers, lady. Seems your sheriff

brought a dead convict in, or something, and the D. A. and his foreman went down to the jail for a look. Said they'd be back directly to get on with our business."

Weston gripped Petra by the arm and whispered, "Go bring Sloan and Tegner back here without letting them know why, ma'am."

SHE nodded uncertainly, not understanding his orders, and left the hotel for the jail. Weston strolled into Sloan's office and faced the three cattle buyers.

"Sorry to intrude on this powwow, gents, but I've got to see the district attorney on urgent confidential business. Mind waiting outside for a few minutes?"

The stockmen shrugged, picked up their hats, and made their way out of the office, mumbling something about going down to the jail and getting a look at the slain Yuma convict.

Weston stepped to the window overlooking the porch and drew down the shade. He checked the loads in his gun and thumbed a cartridge from his belt to slip in the empty chamber under the firing pin.

He wished he had left his getaway pony behind the hotel. It muddled things, the sheriff being back in town.

After an interminable wait he heard steps approaching the door and moved quickly to put his back to a side wall, facing the door. It opened to admit Petra Stockton, flanked by a tall, darkly handsome man in a lawyer's clawhammer coat, and striped trousers tucked into polished Hussar boots. That would be Tom Sloan, in his courtroom garb. With him was the foreman of the Ringbone Ranch, Dunc Tegner.

Tegner was the man who met the solid strike of Weston's gaze. Here was the man he had seen struggling with Detectice Brett Kleveland on the rear platform of the Phoenix Express this morning. The ramrod was chewing an unlighted cigar under his ferret-tail mustache, and his barrel chest was clad in the red-and-black Rob Roy shirt so indelibly stamped on Weston's memory.

CHAPTER V

Telegram to a Sheriff

NO RECOGNITION showed in Dunc Tegner's muddy eyes as he stared indifferently at the man waiting in Sloan's office. That was as Weston had expected. Tegner had no way of knowing that his attack on Kleveland had been witnessed from the railroad bridge.

"Good evening," Tom Sloan said, puzzled, staring across the office at Weston. "What's the deal, Petra? Who is this man?"

Petra closed the door behind her and said in a thin voice, "Tom, meet Mr. Brett Kleveland, the range detective I sent for."

Weston saw the waxen pallor sweep the color from Tom Sloan's face, the guilt-born incredulity in the cowtown lawyer plain to read. Weston dropped a hand to gun-butt. But when he made his draw, Dunc Tegner was the target of his gun.

"These men know I'm not Brett Kleveland," Weston said to the girl. "They just got back from viewing Kleveland's body at the jail, and it must have been quite a shock to hear you introduce me as Kleveland. Tegner, do you want to tell Miss Stockton why I'm not the cattle detective she thinks I am?"

Petra made a little frightened moan as her gaze swung from Weston to Tegner, saw the cigar drop from the ramrod's jaw as his teeth bit clean through the stogie. Tegner fell back a pace before the menace of Weston's Colt, his eyes flicking up and down Weston's rangeland garb, recognizing it as the clothing the man he had killed had worn, and understanding why the dead man at the jail was wearing a convict suit.

"You tell us, convict!" Tegner jeered.

Weston shrugged. "'*Sta bueno,* I will. Miss Stockton, these clothes I'm wearing belonged to Kleveland. But Tegner enticed your CPA man out on the back

coach platform of the Phoenix Express this morning. When the train was passing over Coyotero Canyon bridge, Tegner booted Kleveland overboard—to his death."

Petra had gone chalk-white. Her eyes were on Tom Sloan, as if trying to read what lay back of her fiancé's paralysis.

Sloan broke the tortured silence which followed Weston's grim disclosure.

"Then who are you? What grounds have you for accusing my foreman of killa man?"

Weston grinned crookedly, never taking his eyes off Tegner's crouched figure.

"I'm just an hombre who happened to be down in the canyon when Tegner kicked Kleveland off that train. Who I am makes no difference. The important thing is, who ordered Tegner to make away with that detective? Was it you, Sloan?"

Comprehension came to Sloan's keen-whetted brain in that instant.

"The sheriff came in with a dead man wearing the clothing of a Yuma convict this evening," he said. "That dead man was Kleveland. You're that lifer named Randolph Weston. You switched clothes with Kleveland."

Petra Stockton's terror-filled eyes were on Weston as he nodded. "I'll admit that, Sloan. Tegner, are you going to deny—"

Dunc Tegner broke the shackles which had chained him up to now. With an incoherent cry, the Ringbone foreman clawed at his holstered six-gun, lamplight glinting on blued metal as he swiveled the open-toed holster up for a desperation shot from the hip.

A nozzle of purple-orange flame spurted from the bore of Weston's gun. The concussion made the flame of the desk lamp leap. The point-blank bullet caught Tegner in the chest and slammed him back against the flimsy wall, his own gun recoiling violently in holster as he triggered his wild shot into the carpet.

BLOOD gouted in a crimson flood over the brass buckles of Tegner's gun harness as he rolled over on his side, cramped with the agony of his wound, his eyes seeking out Tom Sloan standing over him, his face an inscrutable mask.

"Tom—you stand there—saying nothing—"

The cowtown lawyer glared down at him, his jaw working. "Why in hell should I? If you killed a man—"

"At your orders, Tom," choked the dying foreman. "Miss Petra—it was Tom Sloan — bushwhacked your dad — that night. So he could take over the Rafter S—after you got hitched."

Weston swung his smoke-spewing gun toward Sloan, but too late. The lawyer leaped backward and sideways to put Petra Stockton's slim body between him and the fugitive convict across the room, whipping back his steelpen coat to clear his own gun as he moved.

Sweeping Petra against him, powerless in the locking embrace of his left arm, Sloan thrust his stubby-barreled Bisley .38 under Petra's other arm and brought the gun to a steady aim at Weston, nullifying the fugitive's brief advantage.

Sloan's breathing was hot against Petra's neck as he snarled his defiance at the man who had brought his perfidy into the open:

"Think it over, Weston. We've both got to get out of Red Butte fast. I'll make a bargain with you. Drop your gun. You'd have to kill this woman to hit me—"

Weston held his crouched posture, making no move to drop his weapon, knowing death would be the inevitable price of such a move. Yet, out of practice as he was, he knew it would be shaving it too fine to attempt to gun down the man who was using his fiancée as a shield to save his own skin.

He saw Petra staring at him, and for a girl who had seen the man she had planned to marry exposed for what he was, she showed no sign of heartbreak. When she spoke, it was to the desperate man behind her:

"Dad tried to tell me you were using the Ringbone as a smuggling base, Tom. He tried to tell me you were interested in

me—not for myself—but because you wanted to add the Rafter S to your range. Mr. Kleveland, whoever you are—go ahead and shoot."

For a space of ten clock ticks the intolerable deadlock held, neither Weston nor Sloan daring to be the first to jerk trigger.

Dunc Tegner bled out his life during that fragment of time, quietly settling in a sprawled heap on the floor.

And then the impasse was broken by the sudden opening of the door behind Sloan, the impact of it jostling the lawyer's elbow and giving the girl the chance she had been awaiting. Oblivious to her own danger, Petra Stockton pivoted inside the crushing pressure of Sloan's arm and knocked his exploding Bisley aside so that the slug missed Rand Weston by a wide margin.

The big, apron-chapped figure of Sheriff Miles Millbride stood in the open doorway, his gun out of leather. He was yelling, "What was that shooting?"

Weston charged Sloan before the lawyer could shake Petra's grip off his gun, and clubbed the man with his slashing gun-muzzle. Sloan went down, dragging Petra with him. There was a white gleam of bone momentarily visible on his slashed scalp, and then it quickly washed over with welling crimson.

Sheriff Millbride's trail-weary eyes were round with confusion as they swept the gunsmoke-shrouded scene — Dunc Tegner lying dead, Sloan gun-whipped into a cold stupor. And dominating this scene was a tall stranger in batwing chaps and calf-hide vest who was helping Petra Stockton to her feet. It was too much for Millbride.

"What goes on?" he panted, waving his own six-shooter aimlessly. "I come over to tell the DA about a telegram I got from the Yuma warden about that dead convict I brung down from the desert today, and I run into a shambles. What's it all about, Petry?"

She got her self under control with an effort and said, "It's all right, Miles. It was Tom who killed my father that night. And Dunc Tegner died because he threw a cattle detective off a train into Coyotero Canyon."

WESTON saw the bright gleam of dawning understanding kindle in the sheriff's rheumy eyes as he stared.

"Are you Rand Weston, young feller?"

"Yes," the fugitive said hoarsely. "I swapped clothes with the stock detective Tegner kicked off the Phoenix Express. Your posse brought in the wrong man."

Incredibly, a grin touched Millbride's dusty lips and he thrust his gun into holster.

"Mind telling me why you were sent up for life, son?"

Weston shrugged. It became suddenly important to him that Petra Stockton knew the truth before Millbride put the cuffs on him. For Weston knew he was not going to use the gun in his hand to force a getaway from this room. He couldn't kill a man who was only doing his duty.

"The courts didn't believe my story, so I don't expect you to, Sheriff," he said. "Two years ago, I was running a cow spread up in the Tonto Basin country, with a pardner named Wade McKnight. We caught a nester butchering one of our steers and had an argument. McKnight shot the granger. In court he accused me of the shooting, and I accused him. If the jury could have been sure, one or the other of us would have hung. But it was my word against McKnight's, so we both drew life sentences at Yuma prison."

Weston handed his gun, butt foremost, to the lawman. Millbride stuck the .45 into the waistband of his overalls.

"According to my information, you made your getaway from a chain gang up in the Sierra Secos yesterday," the lawman said gently. "This Tonto pardner of yours, Wade McKnight—"

"He died in the rock slide. With his death went my last hope that he'd clear me of killing that hoeman, Sheriff."

Without a word, Millbride rummaged a pocket of his shirt and brought out the yellow telegram flimsy he had brought

over to the hotel for the district attorney to read.

"Read that, Weston," Millbride said. "It's from the warden of Yuma pen. It was waiting for me when I got in with my posse tonight."

Scowling, Weston took the paper. He knew he was reading its context, but the words shredded together in his brain, making no immediate sense:

This is to advise you that in event you succeed in apprehending Convict Number 89-Y-2910, Randolph Weston, to release him immediately on authority of information contained herein. Weston serving life sentence for a murder which has been confessed by Convict Number 89-Y-2909, Wade McKnight. McKnight fatally injured in premature dynamite blast at Sierra Seco road camp from which Weston escaped yesterday. McKnight's dying confession absolves Weston of guilt in connection with murder for which he and McKnight were sentenced. Confirmation follows by letter.

J. J. MONTGOMERY,
Warden, Terr. Prison.

The telegram fluttered from Weston's nerveless fingers. He was vaguely aware of Petra Stockton reaching up to pull his head down and crush her lips to his.

"Don't you understand?" she whispered brokenly. "You're free! You're free because you carried out the job Brett Kleveland was to have done."

Weston peered through the fog of his own spinning senses to see Sheriff Millbride stoop and clamp handcuffs around the wrists of Tom Sloan.

"Only one string attached to you, so far as Red Butte is concerned," Millbride said. "I'll need your testimony to put a hangrope around Sloan's craw when his trial comes up. After that you can head back to your ranch in the Tonto country, if you want."

Staring down into Petra Stockton's brimming eyes, Rand Weston said hoarsely, "I got no ranch to go back to, Sheriff. I reckon if there's a peg in the Rafter S bunkhouse where a man can hang his John B., I'll be sticking around this neck of the woods for quite some time."

And he knew from the promise in Petra's eyes that there was another life sentence in prospect, a life sentence which she would share.

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That fiddle screeched and squawked, screamed and moaned

Fiddle and Fight

By CY KEES

Judging the fiddling contest was an honor—with strings attached!

MAYBE you think it's quite an honor, being elected to judge a contest. Takes savvy, you say, and people have to know that before they'll cut you out of the herd and let you do it. Just let me, Dink Heath, tell you how wrong you are.

I thought so too that day I wandered into Lagtown after three days of having belt notches instead of grub to eat. I was just getting untangled from my crowbait when this bunch came up, dressed like

they'd just been to a wedding.

The leader was a little pot-bellied gent. The color of his nose said he was a bartender, but he introduced himself as the mayor of Lagtown.

"You have just been elected to do the judgin' for the main event in our rodeo celebration," he said, puffing out what chest he had. "The old fiddler's contest, of which there is none finer than in Lagtown." I figured maybe he'd gone a little bad in the eyes and mistook me for somebody else.

"I'm a stranger here," I said, to be sure. "Name of Dink Heath, and—"

"Dink Heath," he said, lapping the name around his lips like it smacked good. "A very dignified and upstanding name. Judge Dink Heath, do you accept this great honor?"

"Well . . ." Trying to act coy, like I was always being called on to judge something, I hesitated. Then I spotted her in back of the group.

She was small and slim and had oceans of dark, curly hair, and . . . Oh, damn the fifty years behind me! That was exactly the gal I looked for myself thirty years ago. But what I noticed most was the way her brown eyes were begging, and she was shaking her head back and forth, no. She formed it with her lips then: "No!"

"No," I said. Didn't know why I shouldn't, but that little gal's word was good enough for me. The mayor's nose got a shade redder. Somebody jammed him with an elbow and whispered something. The mayor got a weasel smirk on his face.

"That's too bad, Judge," he said. "Thought with all the free grub and drinks and—" His voice trailed off, but he didn't have to say any more.

"Just a slip of the tongue when I said no," I said—fast. "I'd be proud for the honor of judgin' your fiddlin' contest."

That settled it. Grinning at each other, they shook hands all around and told me where they'd leave word that my drinks and grub was free. Most of them took a bead on the nearest saloon, like they'd just got a big worry off their minds.

That made me a little leary, and I started wondering why I'd been elected. I couldn't judge a fiddlin' contest. Hell, I'd only tried to play one once. That time all the calves in hearing distance got the dry heaves and died. One of the owners reasoned it into me with two rock fists that I was no hand with a fiddle. And that's the last time I played.

"Do you know why you were picked to judge?" asked a voice from behind me, and I whirled. It was the gal with all the dark hair, looking at me kind of pitying, like I was going to be the main bait at a lynching.

"Why, I reckon 'cause they see as to how I got a good eye for fiddle music," I gulped, not wanting to admit anything yet. She shook her head.

"It's because every other person was scared to death to take it," she said, her brown eyes serious. "They had to find some stranger, some foolish stranger, who wouldn't have any better sense than to accept the job. You just happened to—"

"Just show me the flannelheads that's going to stampede the judge," I snapped, dropping into my favorite gunman crouch. "Point them out, and I'll drop every—"

"It's just my father," she said, real low, and tried to blink back a whole cloudburst of tears. "I . . . I just knew there was going to be trouble, and then Tom and I won't be able to get married, and . . . Oh, why did you have to come?"

SHE buried her face in her hands and ran off down the street. About the time she disappeared into an eating house, a young caddie charged towards me, blood in his eye, hand on gun. He came close, and his gray eyes were as cold as a Montana blizzard.

"What was the idea, makin' Evie cry?" he said, so low and soft he was almost whispering. I put my hand as far as I could get it from my gun without sawing it off at the wrist.

"Didn't know that I'd done anything," I said. "'Cept say I was going to judge the fiddlin' contest."

"You damn fool!" he said, disgusted. "Thought they'd call that off for lack of judges—now you had to stick in your long nose." He shrugged. "I'm Tom Tovey, and as long as you're going to do it, I'll help all I can." Shaking his head, he spun on his heel and ambled on down the street.

He left me alone and wondering what breed of hornet's nest I'd stuck my head in this time. I strolled down to the eating house and spotted that Evie gal at one of the corner tables. She looked up when I stood across from her, then looked away, kind of shy now.

I hated that. From the way she'd talked, she had plenty reason to cuss me out, and she didn't have to feel bad about it. Lots of people have cussed me out for no reason at all, and they still didn't give a hoot about it. Evie glanced up then, and tried to smile.

"I'm sorry I acted mad," she said, brown eyes getting a little twinkle as I kept gaping at her. Curious as an old woman at a sudden riot, I sat down.

"Sure like to know why everybody goes around actin' like mean dogs just 'cause I'm doing the judgin'," I grumbled. Evie took a deep breath.

"I'll explain, if I can," she said. "You see, there's only going to be two contestants. My father, Mountain-man Masters and Pop Tovey. He's the dad of Tom Tovey, the . . .," She sighed. "I'm going to marry him."

"So," I put in. They're so be-damned even matched, I'll have to deal cut your throat, one flip with the cards to pick 'twixt them. That it?" Evie flushed.

"No," she said, "one of them . . . well, one of them can't hardly play at all." Heh, I thought, she's tryin' to cover up for Tom's dad, poor gal. But trying to get her to face up to it, I glared at her.

"If this Tovey can't play for sour owls, then why doesn't he herd hisself out of the contest and let—"

"Oh, no," she said very quick, flushing deeper. "It's my father that . . . that can't play too well."

"Oh." I said. There was a long minute of dead quiet while I wished I'd taken a different trail. "Well," I said finally, "I'll have to be fair in the matter and choose Tovey then, much as I hate to vote agin your old man." Evie smiled, a patient kind of smile, and I knew there was more to come, the worst end of it.

"That's just it," she said in a bleak voice. "That's why nobody would be judge. My father, along with my three brothers . . ." She gasped and stood up fast. "There they are now," she whispered. "Pretend like you're somebody else." She glided between the tables and out of the door.

There were three of them, and I guessed them to be the brothers. They wandered toward me, kind of spreading out so I couldn't keep track of them all. Under the cover of the table, I slipped out my .45 and laid it ready in my lap.

I don't know how they could all three look so damned different and yet have the same poison mean set in their faces.

The first was good-looking—about like a diamondback is, sleek and slimy. His eyes glistened with orneriness. He seen that the other two got me good and surrounded before he opened his yap.

"I'm Steve Masters," he said. "You're Dink Heath, and don't bother denying it or Sliver there'll have to cut your tongue out. You're going to judge the fiddling contest tonight. Good. See that you vote for Mountain-man Masters and things'll stay that way." He moved around the table and another one shuffled up to take his place.

He was big as a buffalo with a flat red face. Beet red. He looked me over close, fingering a pair of .44's.

"Buff Masters's the handle." he snapped. "You do like Steve says or I'll shoot you full of holes, you'll look like that colander Evie uses to make prune jam. You savvy that?" Knowing I didn't have a chance, I nodded. He moved away and the last of the three brothers took his place.

He was as little as Buff was big—a runty weasel. But he looked meaner'n the other two together. He picked dirt

out from under his fingernails with a big Bowie knife.

"Sliver Masters talkin'," he snarled. "This knife does mean slicin' jobs, and it'll do another if my old man doesn't win a prize in that fiddlin' contest." Silver looked just a little sad then. "He's been enterin' for 26 years 'thout a prize and it's high time he gets one. Savvy?" I gulped and nodded again, and they ambled off.

WHEW, I thought, there's nobody, including me, Dink Heath, that's going to buck a combination like that. No sirree. Any man what tries for 26 years has got the prize coming, that's my opinion, and that's the way I judge. Still feeling shaky, I ordered my meal.

Somehow, it didn't taste so good after all. Maybe this Pop Tovey ain't so tender either, I thought, and the way his kid, Tom, acted, he wasn't no slouch in a ruction neither. Kind of looked like I got the job of picking between getting butchered or getting slaughtered.

And that'd be a mean decision to make, on account of either way it'd leave a man in bad shape. Maybe I'd jumped into this a mite hasty, I thought. I tucked a good meal under my belt and arrived at my decision.

Judging just ain't my line, that's all, and they'd just have to find somebody else to fill my place. With a full gut and a job like that to face, the trail started looking mighty good again. Time I was getting back to it, I figured. I slipped out and went over to where I'd tied my crowbait.

He wasn't there! Swallowing hard, I guessed what that meant. They'd figured I'd try to run out, and they were making sure I'd stay. Glaring at everybody I passed, I made my way to the livery stable.

I peaked in the door. It was gloomy as a cellar inside, but I spotted my crowbait in a stall. Good old crowbait. As quiet as a cougar on the scent, I slipped my saddle from the rack. Something hard jarred me in the back, and I froze.

I chanced a look around, and there stood the mayor, his bartender nose glowing even in the dark. He smirked.

"Judges being such flighty characters, I thought I'd better keep watch," he said. "Wouldn't want you to miss all the honor and fame of the big night." He grabbed my .45 and I'd've just as soon see him pull one of the few good teeth I've got left. Hell, teeth is no good to a man in boothill anyhow, and that's where I was headed.

"The prize to be awarded will be a new fiddle," the mayor said. "It'll be at the door of the hall, and you take it up to the judge's stand with you."

I shrugged. "All right, you win for this time, Torch-nose," I snapped. "But just remember this. Any hide I lose in this deal, I'm collecting from you—and I take a healthy measure!" I stomped out and on up to the saloon where I can get free drinks.

Five of them, one chasing close behind the other, and still the cold knot didn't go out of my belly. Felt just like I'd swallered a snowball. It nagged me right to the bones that there was going to be hell to pay in that hall.

And me without a gun. Near time for the contest, I took a deep breath and went out. A hundred feet from the hall, Evie Masters darted out of the shadows.

"Dink?" she whispered. I stopped and waited. She looked worried and her brown eyes were dead serious. "Be sure and judge honest tonight, Dink," she said, shooting nervous glances around. "That darn Tom bet all the money we're going to get married on that his dad'll win—and you got to see that he does."

I nodded. "Yeah, I will," I said. I wondered if I should put in my order for a pine box right there with her. From the way things were building up, I'd be a sure customer for one. Fifty feet from the hall door, the Masters boys, all three, slithered out of the shadows like rattlers. Sliver glared at me hard.

"What we said down in the eatin' house now goes double," he rasped. "You see that our old man wins the prize. Savvy?" I nodded.

Hell, I thought, if I don't get away from these people, I'll have to work a fork in my tongue. Worst is, I didn't even know anymore when I was lying, because I sure didn't know how I was going to call that contest.

I hated to see Tom lose the money to marry Evie, but I sure hated worse to get shot up like a colander and sliced to bits from her brothers. Poor gal, in a way she was caught too and would lose either way. If only I'd taken her word for it when she said no the first minute I was in Lagtown. Ten feet from the door, Tom Tovey marched out of the shadows, a violin case tucked under his arm. He gave me a big wink.

"I said I'd help you out," he said. "Here. You know I can't do much in there on account of Evie being right there with me. But you can use this."

I took it and put it under my arm. That must be the prize fiddle that the mayor was talking about, I thought. Precious lot of help that was.

I felt a little disappointed, mainly because Evie was marrying such a brainless sap. Well, just when I got through the door, here came the mayor with another fiddle case.

"Ah, hah!" he cackled, smirking at the fiddle case under my arm. "So you're going to get in the contest yourself, eh? Can't get shot fast enough just judgin' the thing." He clapped his knee, laughing, and gave me the fiddle. That made two, but what the hell, I thought, can't get shot any worse for giving two away than one.

THEY had a chair up on a high stage, with "Judge" marked on it, and that's where I headed. The house was full and everybody cheered, so I tried to look respectable and dignified like a judge, walking up to that chair.

But that's harder to do than it sounds, with two fiddle cases under your arms. I couldn't see bottom and stumbled over all but the last two of the stage steps. I fell over them, right onto the stage.

Everybody hoorawed and clapped, and my head felt hotter'n a branding iron. I laid one of those cases on each side of the chair and tried to relax in it. Getting a little used to all those faces, I looked around for the contestants.

They weren't hard to find, even if they wouldn't have had their names above their seats. They sat alone with their fiddles, glaring at each other. Pop Tovey was small, with grey hair and kind of meek-looking.

Mountain-man Masters was around six-five, skinny as a rail, with a long beard and mean-looking eyes. I guess he was trying to curry favor because he smiled my way.

But it didn't fool me a minute. Just the way his face cracked above the beard, you could see it was the first time he'd smiled in the last five years.

And right after, he gave me a kind of warning glare, as if to say: "Any damn jackass can plainly see I'm the prize fiddler in this territory, so don't you try to give that fiddle to anybody else!" He had a short-gun, half the size of a horse pistol low on his leg to back his judgment. The red-nosed mayor waddled up on the stage.

He gave a fine speech—I sat there wishing it would last all night. But the crowd yelled him down and said to get on with the fiddling.

Evie Masters and Tom Tovey sat way off to one side of the crowd, looking worried. In the front row center sat her three brothers, Steve, Buff and Sliver. They didn't look worried.

Just plain mean and impatient for their old man to amble off with the prize. Oh, how I hoped Mountain-man could make sugary music with that fiddle. If I could judge him best, then my hide'd be safe and nobody would have a howl coming. Pop Tovey came up first, and that was something to hear.

He played sad songs and tears leaked out of half the eyes in the hall. Gay songs and they were laughing; dance tunes and they all kept time with their feet. All I saw except Mountain-man and his three boys.

Mountain-man kind of held his nose up

in the air sniffing, as if to say: "You boys and gals ain't heard nothin' yet. Just wait till I get *my* fiddle unlimbered."

Me, I enjoyed it, forgetting, for a time, that good music was the last thing I wanted to hear out of Tovey. He stopped and cased his fiddle. Rehitching his clothes, Mountain-man stood up and strutted up on the stage.

Flexing the muscles in his arm, he started sawing. And, man, you just would've had to hear that to know how damn-awful it was.

Mountain-man grinned like an egg-sucking skunk when they clapped and cheered, laughing at him. Fact is, he was playing a sad piece. But, believe me, it would've sounded sad no matter what he played.

That fiddle screeched and squawked, screamed and moaned. You'd thought maybe once in a while something decent would've been bound to come out of that mixture, but it never did. Everything was sour. The only thing I could see was that he must've poured it full of pickle juice, vinegar and cider gone wrong. And that whole works now came boiling out the strings.

He played on and on, and his playing didn't sweeten with the extra practice. Got worse, if anything, and I noticed even his own kid, Buff, tried to muffle his ears. Everybody quieted down to bear the torture as best they could. Then Mountain-man went into his final number, 'The Last Call to Boothill.'

The only thing that did was prove he could get worse, something I would've bet five to one agin a minute before. Finally, his fiddle gave one last agonizing screech and died.

There never was a grave quieter than that room. And everybody looked at me, holding their breaths. I squirmed in my chair and sneaked a glance at the three brothers. Sliver had his gun half snaked out, and the other two looked ready to back any play he made. Mountain-man grinned at me.

"Well, come on, Judge Dink," he said. "Hurry up and give me the prize. I earned it."

The lop-headed liar! There wasn't enough tar and feathers in the territory to give him what he earned. I sucked air in gasps, while everybody waited, quiet as mummies. Stalling for time, I opened the fiddle case, the one Tom Tovey had given me.

All I could do for a minute was stare. Man, what a sweet sight she was! Laying there so snug and ready, and I just knew Tom'd have it all loaded and ready to use. There, all brand, shiny new lay Miss Betsy Scattergun!

I GOT the case up in my lap handy first. With a tight grin, I pulled it out, lined it on those three rattlers in the front row, and pulled both hammers to full cock. They squirmed around, but they didn't try nothing fancy.

"The winner," I said, cool as a chunk of ice, "is Mr. Pop Tovey."

There was a little clapping, but most of the bunch seemed anxious to get the hell out of the building. I shoved the other fiddle case across the stage for Tovey to take. Then I happened to glance at Evie.

Tom talked to her, but she was looking away, and I knew right away she was hurt. He tried to take her hand, but she tucked it away close to her.

Cripes, you know, it was her old man. She probably loved him like most anybody loves their dad, and it was hard to see him lose—and lose the way he did. And Tom's dad winning by a mile made it worse, too.

A gal should have her pride to take to her husband when she gets married, I thought. And Evie still couldn't look at Tom. I turned back to the crowd and waved my hand for quiet.

"Mayor—Mayor what the hell's his name—the one with the barfly nose—asked me to announce there's a special prize for the oldest fiddler in the house," I found myself saying. "He says out of respect for the age—"

"Say, there, Judge Dink, I'm just the very man what you're plabberin' about,"

Mountain-man yelled, real excited, before I ran out of words and floundered. "By damn, this is luck for sure!" Mountain-man glared around the hall. "I'm 103 and any man likes to say different and call me a liar, that man's got me to peel right here!"

Naturally, nobody said anything. With only two in the contest, and with Mountain-man plain the oldest, there was nothing to bicker about.

"I must say," Mountain-man went on, "you do show some judgin' savvy after all, Dink. Trot out the prize and we'll have a look at it."

Right then, I could've took off my boot and shoved it clean in my big mouth. I glanced at Evie, and she was waiting with new hope in her eyes.

But when they found out there was no prize, it'd be worse than ever. They'd all know the mayor never said no such thing, and I just made it up. They'd laugh and jeer all the more, and Evie wouldn't be able to look at Tom at all. All I could do was get out myself, I thought, using the shotgun to . . .

The shotgun! A prize for Mountain-man. Then I looked down at the three rattlers, all looking poison mean in the front row, and I knew I'd be a target for all three, soon as I handed it over. The room quieted again—quiet as death. I glanced at Evie and my heart pounded.

She knew what I was thinking, I could tell that, and her eyes were begging again. She nodded yes, and then formed the word with her lips: "Yes!"

Well, I'd went against her once and come out wrong. And besides, I just couldn't see her hurt.

"The prize for the oldest fiddler," I gulped, "is this fine new shotgun contributed by Tom Tovey. It goes to Mountain-man Masters." I rammed it in his hands and waited for those three to do their worst.

"Just what I always wanted," Mountain-man said. "Never had one of these before." He petted it up.

The lopheaded liar! He had a big crook in his arm that was warped in from carrying a scattergun. Sudden like, all those sons of his were around pumping him on the back and saying what a great fiddler he was. Sliver pulled me off to one side.

"Drinks is on me, Judge," he said. "Sure glad you saw to it the old man finally won a prize." His eyes glittered. "If you hadn't, you'd never got out of town to brag about it. We'd of potted you before you got ten feet out that door!"

I backed away fast, because I still wasn't sure he wouldn't blow up, just thinking of what he'd done if I hadn't given his old man a prize. At the door, I saw Evie and she smiled. Tom took her hand, and she turned and looked him straight in the eye. I saw something then that made me get out fast.

The way the ladies gathered around, blatting in each other's ears, it sure made me spook. No telling, I thought, maybe they'll get in a crocheting contest and hook me in as judge.

And one thing is damned certain. Old Dink Heath, he ain't never going to be a judge again.

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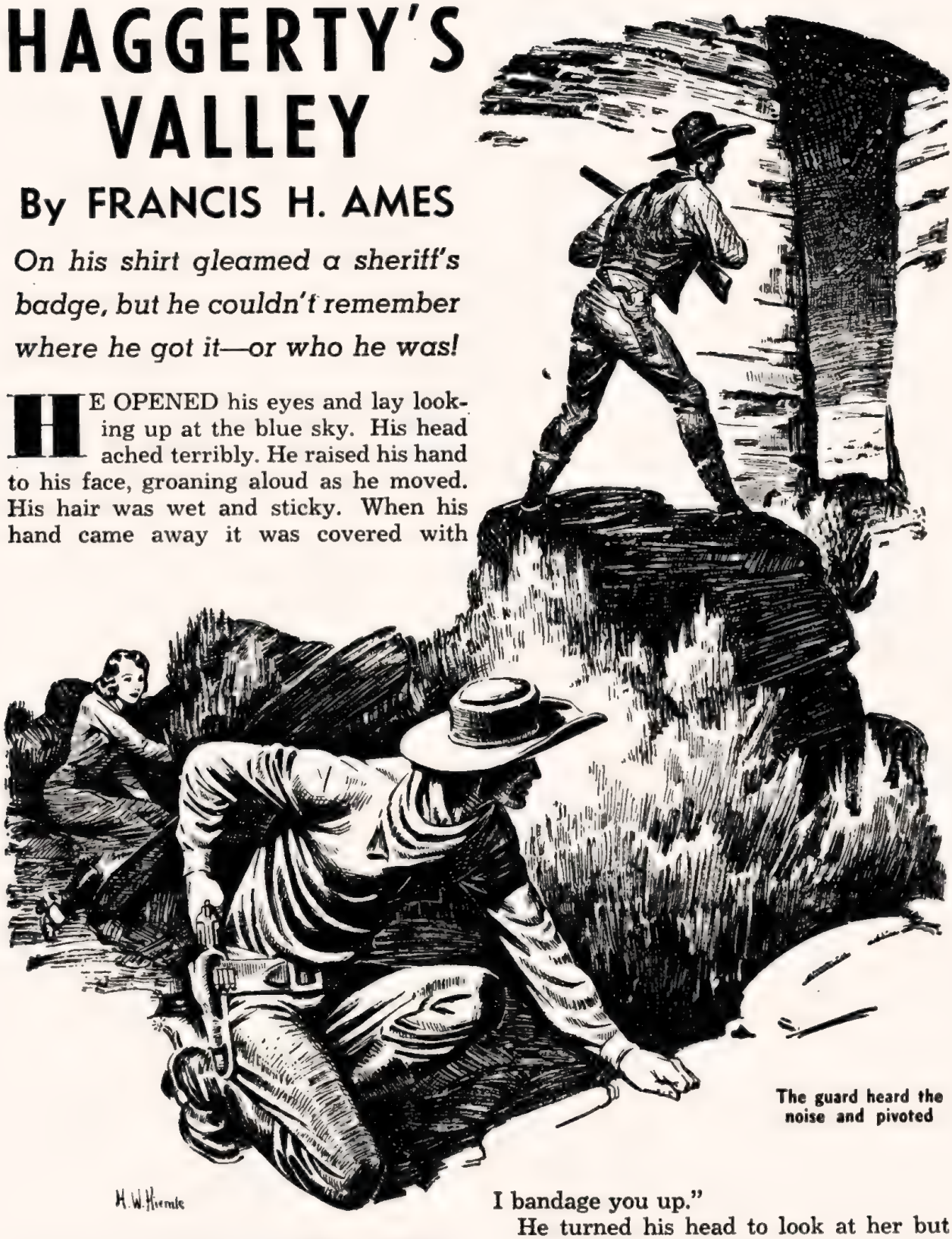
HAGGERTY'S VALLEY

By FRANCIS H. AMES

On his shirt gleamed a sheriff's badge, but he couldn't remember where he got it—or who he was!

HE OPENED his eyes and lay looking up at the blue sky. His head ached terribly. He raised his hand to his face, groaning aloud as he moved. His hair was wet and sticky. When his hand came away it was covered with blood. He stared at it stupidly. It frightened him and he suddenly struggled to rise. Small hands pushed him back to the ground.



The guard heard the noise and pivoted

"Lie still," a feminine voice said, "until I bandage you up."

He turned his head to look at her but she shut off his sight with a cloth that was wet and cool. He could feel her knees pressing against his side. The pungent odor of crushed sage came to his nostrils. She finished washing the blood from his

scalp and then she got behind him and boosted him to a sitting position. He felt strength returning and he started to come to his feet.

"For goodness sake," she exclaimed, "stop squirming around."

He heard the ripping of cloth behind his back. He swiveled his head about, seeing small riding boots and shapely knees. He started to lift his eyes higher but she slapped his face. Not hard, but as a mother would warn a child.

"Keep your eyes in front," she snapped.

He swung his head back, feeling the blood rush to his face. He felt very foolish, sitting there looking at his own legs. They were long, slim legs, adorned with well-worn Justin boots and star rowels. It was then that he noticed the gun, laying close by his side with its muzzle buried in the dirt. It was a good gun, he could see that. It was a Colt .45 with the blue worn from the sides of the frame from long holster wear. He frowned, knowing that no gun should be treated that way. Get sand in the bore and the next slug would cut the grooves; make it carry wild. He reached out and picked the weapon up. He began automatically to punch out the fired hulls and put in fresh ones from his belt.

"That's right, mister," the girl said, "better load up. We're going to need the gun."

SHE came around in front of him then. He sat there and looked up at her. She was a little thing, well rounded, with black hair and eyes. She was wearing a riding skirt and a beaded leather vest. She had a rich, dusky complexion, with a glow of health beneath it. She's an attractive girl, he thought, with a touch of Indian blood in her. The girl spread her feet wide, putting her hands on her slim hips.

"Well," she said impatiently, "aren't you going to get up? You're all right now. I don't know how you'll do it, but you've got to arrest them and cart them off to jail."

"Arrest them?" he questioned stupidly. "Arrest who? Why should I arrest them? I don't even know who they are!"

She puzzled him now, and he looked closely at her. Perhaps she is crazy, he thought—loony in the head. Who is she, anyway, and who are these folks she speaks of. He fumbled with the thought and then, suddenly, his mind latched down on a more serious problem.

Who was he! He didn't know. Of that he was sure, and he sat on the ground and thought about it. There was an urgency building up in him. He knew that he should get to his feet, but he made no attempt at it. The girl moved toward him with quick steps. She grasped his shirt, pulling it up toward his face.

"Why should you arrest them!" she cried sharply. "Aren't you going to do your duty? Are you going to let a little slap on the head stop you now? You didn't act like a quitter a few minutes ago. You were running, but you did turn and fight when your horse went down. I saw you kill one of them—he's laying out there now."

He looked down at what she held in her hand. He saw the nickel shine of the star. It said DEPUTY SHERIFF on it in big, bold letters. It didn't mean a thing to him, but it did shock him into coming to his feet. The plain below them whirled about for long moments and then it settled down. She was staring at him queerly now. Her dark eyes were puzzled and impatience with him rode high in them.

"I'm sorry, miss," he said, reaching for a Stetson that wasn't there and finding the bandage on his head. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember a thing. I don't know who I am!"

"You don't know who you are!" she echoed, a slow horror coming to her face. "You don't know who you are—or about them?"

"No," he said, "I don't know about them. Am I supposed to know? Am I supposed to do something? What is it that you want me to do?"

She bit her lips in vexation. He could see the impatience in her growing stronger. Impatience and doubt.

"I don't believe you!" she suddenly burst out, stamping her foot. "I'll bet you're afraid of them now that they have

gun whipped you down. You were running from them when I first saw you."

Her voice rose, almost to hysteria.

"You can't stop now," she cried. "I won't let you. Even though you claim that you don't know who you are, you can still fight. You're the law. You're supposed to be a fighter. If you don't fight now they'll get away with it."

She whirled and went away from him, marching over the rise with long, angry strides, and a swing to her hips. He watched her go. Then he turned himself slowly about, like a wounded bear sniffing its back trail. He was a tall man, with slim hips and a body that widened out to powerful shoulders. His face was long, with thin lips and high cheek bones. His features were haggard and drawn. Blood had dried in a three days' growth of reddish whiskers. His neck was a strong column that rose from a faded blue shirt. His jaw was square, but it hung slackly. His gray eyes held a vacuous, bewildered look.

He stood half-way up a ridge. A brown valley lay curved below him like a cavalry saber in a sheath of hills. Below him also stood a saddled horse. He went down to the horse with uncertain steps, his eyes so intent upon it that he almost stumbled over a dead man. He lay flat on his back, with his head downhill. His spurs were driven into the ground to the boot heels. He was a silly looking man, with a long face and a hole in his head.

THE deputy sheriff stood there and looked down at the fellow. It didn't seem to him that he'd ever seen this man before, yet he had an almost overpowering impulse to kick him in the ribs. She said I killed him, he thought, but I don't believe her. Still, there were five fired hulls in the gun that had lain beside him, its muzzle rammed in the earth. The woman rode up now, leading a long-legged bay. Her face held a sullen, stubborn look as she leaned over and handed him the reins. He took them from her absent-mindedly, his thoughts still latched to the man on the ground and the gray horse with the blazed face that lay on the hillside.

"Get on and ride," she said. "We're going after them."

He looked up at her as stubbornness came to his face and the slack jaw hardened down.

"Look, sister," he said sarcastically, "don't try to railroad me into anything. I don't know who you are or who I am. I don't know who this button-head hombre is, here on the ground. I don't know a thing. I ain't goin' anywhere until I do."

"This is Haggerty's Valley," she said, "and I'm Pat Haggerty. We've always washed our own dirty clothes in this valley. We've never called in the law before. We wouldn't now if my father was alive."

Suddenly her black eyes filled with tears. She turned away from him and her shoulders shook with uncontrolled sobs. He moved to swing up on the bay, surprised at his sudden quickness and strength. He rode close to her and put a hand on her arm.

"Tell me about it," he said. "Maybe I can do something to help."

She turned on him fiercely, stifling her grief. "You'll do something," she flared at him. "Father always said that we'd paid taxes to keep things straight in this country. He said, even if we didn't need help, that we'd paid for it. He said that the law was just outside the valley. He told me to send for it if anything ever happened to him. When they killed him, I sent Jerry for the law. Jerry wasn't any good to fight. He was a good ranch hand but he gets drunk every time he gets near whisky. He promised to tell the law I needed them, when he hit town before he took a drink."

Exasperation came to him again, curling his thin lips.

"And I'm supposed to be the sucker that the law sent, eh?" he said. "Who the devil are 'they'? Put a name to them and what they've done. Tell me what I'm going into, sister, and maybe I'll trot along. I may not know who I am but I'm not a reckless fool."

Her face flushed under the lash of his tongue and her lips swelled with stubbornness. She seemed to control her anger with her will.

"There's always been rustlers in the badlands," she explained patiently, "but they were afraid of my father, and my grandfather before him. They never touched our stock until Pete Varham came to lead them. After that we had trouble. Varham is a wild man. He's known from Montana to Texas. Father went into the badlands to see him and I found him dead on the brush. I sent Jerry for you. I didn't know you were here until I heard the shots and saw them chasing you. There were four of them and your horse went down. You were running but you turned and fought then. You killed this man before they reached you with their gun butts. When they saw me riding down on them they didn't know I was a woman, so they ran. I think that they thought you were dead."

Looking at her and hearing her call herself a woman he suddenly realized that she wasn't really a girl. She is about eighteen, he thought, but over the threshold of womanhood. He could see now that she was very desirable. A man could easily want her more than he did stolen cattle. The name "Pete Varham" had a vaguely familiar ring. He felt the question and he asked it bluntly, looking squarely into her black eyes.

"You didn't have any trouble with this gang," he said, "until this Pete Varham came. Did he, by any chance, want more than cattle from you? Did this man want you for himself?

"After all," he added drily, "you're a very pretty woman."

SHE blushed furiously, but her eyes didn't waver from his.

"What difference does it make?" she cried. "Anyway, that really was what caused all the trouble. Father didn't go after them until Varham started bothering me. They began taking our cattle, too."

"And now," he said softly, "you want me to hunt them down and kill them for you. Me, the gent with the busted head. The hombre with five empty shells in his gun and only one dead man on the ground. How do I know I'm not one of the gang? How do I know I haven't got a yellow streak? How do I know I can draw fast or shoot straight? Maybe I can't hit a cow barn in a bucket."

Understanding of his position came to her then and her eyes softened down on him. She leaned over and touched his arm shyly.

"If I could only believe you," she said. "If you would only believe me. You're the law. The law don't hang stars on men who can't shoot, who don't have courage, who aren't smart."

"I'm not smart," he growled, "or I wouldn't have been lying on the hill with my head bashed in. I'm not smart or I would be dusting it over the hill like my tail was afire."

"Where would you go, mister?" she asked quietly. "What would you do?"

Where would he go? What would he do? The terrible realization came to him then that whatever this woman told him, he'd have to believe, for lack of a mind of his own. Wherever she chose to lead him, he'd have to go. She was all that he had to cling to in this new and bewildering world to which he had awakened. The anger fled from his eyes and his face sagged to hopelessness. He picked up the reins on the bay and touched it with the spurs.

"Lead on, Pat Haggerty," he said wearily. "I'm the law if you say so. Take me to these gents and I'll slap 'em on the wrist and tell 'em to be good. You're the doctor. Better call me 'Slim' so I'll know when to jump. I ain't got a handle of my own."

They rode down the ridge together. He took one last look at the man on the ground. The stirrups of the bay were too short for his own legs, and the dead man had short legs. Short, and with the spurs driven into the ground. He must have fallen backward in full jump, he thought, when I shot him. He's a sour-pussed looking brute. As they rode along he thought about it all. His head still ached terribly but he was able to think. This woman and her father had paid to support the law for many years. Now they'd sent for it in their

time of need. He was supposed to represent that law. He reached up and touched the star on his vest with his fingers. She saw the quick, involuntary movement, and her eyes lighted up. Suddenly she smiled at him. She looks mighty sweet, he thought, when she smiles. She's sure beautiful!

They rode a long way. She seemed to know the country like the palm of her hand. Presently they came to where the prairie dropped away to the badlands, that never-never land of the wolf and the outlaw. The westering sun painted the pastel shades of the buttes with a multitude of colors. Yellow, red, ochre, blue and lavender mingled with the sickly, whitish clay of the hardpan. Little grassy mesas threaded their way through the land like wandering brown streams among multicolored islands. He knew at once that he had been in similar places many times, but he saw nothing that was familiar to him now. She seemed to read this in his eyes. She started to explain the lay of the land.

"That's Big Tabletop Butte over there. To the right is Little Tabletop. That long crevasse between them is Coulter's Box Canyon. That's where Sid Coulter and his gang holed up years ago. They tell me that my grandfather killed Coulter and three of his men there, before I was born. That's the last time anyone tried to rustle Haggerty cattle. We've always fought our own battles, Slim."

"And," he said, looking hard at her, "these men that rustled your stock and killed your father are holed up in this canyon now?"

"I think so," she said. "Father always said that they were using Coulter's old headquarters. He talked a lot about riding in and having it out with them after Pete Varham started pestering me on the range."

A WAVE of hot anger swept over him then, thinking of this man who laid for her when he wasn't near to protect her. He took his gun from his hip and ran his bandana through the bore to work out any sand that might be there. She watched him and worry came to her face.

"Look," she said, "I'm sorry. I acted like a fool. I know now that you really don't know who you are. We'd better turn back. No man can ride into danger without confidence in himself, not knowing if he can shoot straight and fast, not sure whether he's brave or not."

"We'll go on," he said, ramming the Colt back in its holster. "If this Pete Varham won't stand hitched to be arrested, he'll have to fight."

"Yes," she said quietly, her eyes softening down on him, "he'll have to fight. I'm sure now that he will."

They rode down the steep way single file. He rode the way she had pointed out from the ridge. He would have ridden right out on the hardpan flat before the box canyon's entrance if she hadn't stopped him.

"I thought the law was supposed to be clever," she chided.

He pulled up abruptly, swerved his mount into the brush and swung down, hunkering under a scrub cedar.

"We'll have to wait here until dark," he said, as though it had been his plan all along. "If this is an outlaw hideout, they'll have a guard posted at the entrance. They always do. There will be four of them, not three."

"Yes," she said, sitting beside him now, "there'll be four, at least. I wish that I had a gun."

The sun was squatting down behind the rim of the buttes now. Long, purple shadows reached across the mesa, touching her body but not her hair. It's black as the wing of a crow, he thought. Black, and soft, and silky. He had an inane and almost overpowering desire to reach out and stroke her hair. She's got Indian blood, he thought again, but not much. Just enough to make her stick to a man like a leech if she ever picks one to be her own. He found himself wondering how it would be to be that man. He tried to shut such thoughts from his mind but they persisted—his blood quickened. Without her he'd be a wanderer in the wilderness. Her mind was his mind now. But for her he'd have

ridden out on the flat, in plain view of any guard that might be at the canyon's mouth. He might be dead now, cold and waiting for the coyotes to pick his bones. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

"I didn't think about the guard," he said slowly. "I guess my head isn't working right. Maybe I never was a smart hombre. If you hadn't stopped me I might be dead now. Without you, Pat, I'd be helpless."

She didn't speak, but she looked at him and smiled again. It was a slow, teasing smile. There was tenderness for him in it now. He recalled a Sioux maiden that had once smiled at him in the same way along the banks of the Missouri. She'd been possessed of the same kind of eyes, black, and speaking out to a man, drawing him to her. He'd been about twenty years old then, he thought, and his blood had been wild and hot. Still, he'd turned away. Monkey with a Sioux maiden and you wake up with your scalp gone.

Thinking about this, it suddenly came to him that he'd once been a scout for General Miles. That was how it happened that he knew about Indians. That was why they had made him a deputy sheriff. For a fleeting instant he almost knew who and what he was. Then it escaped him, before he could tie the thought down. He felt an eagerness to tell her about it. I'll wait, he thought, until it all comes back to me, if it ever does. Instantly there came a sense of caution. With his mind clear again she might pick up and leave him alone. He had a sure feeling that he didn't want her to do this. She was a sweet girl. He wanted her close by his side.

"The guard," he said, seeing that it was now fully dark, "will be high above the canyon's mouth in the daytime. As it gets dark he'll move down low, where he can hear."

"Yes," she said, breathlessly, waiting for him to go on.

"If he hears a noise he'll come down to investigate. When he gets to where he heard the noise, there'll be nothing there."

"Where will it be?" she asked, queerly.

"It'll be behind him," he said, as he tilted his long body forward and moved away on hands and knees. "You stay here, Pat."

IT TOOK him a long time to skirt the hardpan flat. He knew that he couldn't be too long about it because the moon glow was beginning to tint the horizon. Finally he crouched at the canyon's mouth, below the point where a guard should be, if one were stationed. He reached out and shook a sage clump vigorously. It was only a whisper in the night, but it should be enough for an alert man on guard. He listened, but he heard no sound for a long time. He was reaching out to shake the brush again when he heard the twig snap above him. He stretched out like a thin shadow on the hardpan, hugging the base of the incline. The man above him cursed softly as he stumbled. A rider, he thought, never learns to walk silently, like the Indians, who are the finest scouts in the world.

The guard came down. He stepped clear, half crouched, looking warily about. He took a step toward the dark shadow on the ground and his rifle came up. Then a thrown stone lit on the canyon's floor behind him. Instantly, he pivoted about, flinging the gun to his shoulder. Slim felt himself moving with fluid motion. It seemed to him that his actions came from beyond himself, as in a dream. He came to his feet, drawing the heavy Colt and snapping the long barrel down with a limber arm. The butt struck the guard a glancing blow. He staggered, dropping the rifle, cursing feebly. He whirled, weaving in, wrapping powerful arms about his opponent.

The lawman's hand cupped beneath the whiskered chin, forcing it back with all of his strength. His knee pistoned up to batter the man in the belly. The guard grunted with pain and doubled forward. Slim stepped back. His heavy fist came up in an arching curve. It met the guard's jaw with the sickening "crunch" of a cleaver falling on beef. The deputy sheriff caught the man as he fell, easing him to the ground. Either I'm the law, he thought, or I'm an experienced outlaw. I did this too easy—I've done it before.

He tore his neckerchief in two and stuffed it in the fellow's slack mouth. He was tying it in when the girl crawled up and shoved the rope in his hands. He could hear her excited breathing in the night. Her hands reached out in the darkness and fumbled over his face.

"Are you all right, Slim?" she breathed. "It was awful. All I could hear was the cursing and threshing of bodies. I'll not stay behind again. I'll stay by your side."

"You were by my side," he told her, as he trussed up the guard with the rope. "He was raising his rifle to shoot when you threw the stone behind him. Thanks, Pat.

"I forgot again," he said. "I forgot the rope to tie him with. I'll always forget, Pat. You'll have to stay close by me all my life. You'll have to stick around, kid, and show me the way."

"I'll not leave you," she said, "as long as you need me, Slim." Her voice was strangely muffled.

The moon tossed its first rays into the canyon, shimmering on the tears in her eyes. She leaned toward him and sighed. He had the sudden feeling that he was going to kiss her and he did. He found her lips to be as sweet, and soft, and clinging, as he had imagined they would be. She clung to him and the salt of her tears came to his lips. He wanted to stay and kiss her again, but the way up the canyon was clear. He had a job to do and he was the law. The star on his vest said so and she had said so.

He started up the canyon, flitting from rock to rock, and from buffalo berry clump to wild plum bush. It was a stealthy game and he played it well. The moon had completely risen when he reached the end of the canyon. The cabin sat in a meadow before a high cliff.

The moon turned the stack of prairie hay to a mound of gold. The bars of the corral were long shadows across the yellow of the night. There was no movement here. The hum of the crickets built an overtone of peace on the scene. The odor of cattle, horses, and wood smoke drifted over the small meadow. A dim light burned in the one windowed cabin. A steer mourned softly. Pat Haggerty was suddenly at his side, tugging at his arm.

"You can't go in there," she whispered. "It would be suicide."

"Your father," he said flatly, "was killed by these men."

"Yes," she said fiercely, "and I wanted revenge. But now I see that I have no right. . . . Oh, Slim, I don't want you hurt!"

HE'D held this woman in his arms and kissed her a few minutes back. Still, his voice was harsh now as he spoke, his face stern.

"You told me that I was the law," he said, "and I believed you. Now it's my duty to arrest these men. You have no right to try to stop me."

"But the law is clever," she said. "It isn't at all clever to walk across this clearing to be riddled with bullets."

He looked at the cabin and thought about the cleverness of the law. There seemed no chance for cleverness here. If there were, he couldn't think it out. Perhaps it was because his head still ached—still felt queer. There was nothing here but sleeping death; a silent cabin, ready to erupt into flaming action at his first knock on the door. The star on his vest would inflame men such as these. It would serve only as a target to his heart.

"You've got to listen to me, Slim," she begged, shaking his shoulder. "Pete Varham isn't brave—he's crazy. He'll come at you, swearing and shooting. You're in no shape to face a man like that."

He pushed her away and walked across the clearing toward the door. His boots made no sound and he walked like a cat. He came up to the door, thinking of Pete Varham, who came at a man swearing and shooting. Fear swept over him but he brushed it aside, heaving his shoulder at the door, bursting into the dim lit room, his Colt sweeping up at full cock.

"Up with 'em!" he roared. "You're under arrest!"

There were two men playing cards at the table. They sat there and looked up at him with open mouths. One was a thin

man with a broken nose and a twisted mouth. His face was still, but his eyes were wary, like a trapped rat. The other man was fat and balding. His eyes were brown as those of a spaniel. There was a stunned look on his features and fear rode high in his eyes. Slim suddenly felt very foolish. It had all been so easy.

"I'm the law," he snapped, although he wasn't at all sure if he was the law. "Get those hands up and keep them up."

Their hands came up slowly. Their eyes fastened on the star on his vest.

"So!" the thin man exploded. "Old Sam Yeager finally got up enough dander to send a deputy into the badlands. He must be getting addled in his old age."

"Put up your weapon, Sheriff," the balding man said, "and I'll deal you a hand of cards. Me and Cal, here, may have rustled a few head in our time but we ain't got none corraled now. You ain't got no goods on us this time. You might as well hunker down and be sociable."

Slim held the gun on the men while his mind wavered. He felt completely baffled and bewildered. There was something wrong here, but what was it? These men were vaguely familiar to him. Unpleasantly so, and they knew him and who he was. The desire to get this knowledge from them rose up, stifling his caution. He was forming the words to ask them when Pat Haggerty burst into the room.

"Quick!" she exclaimed, urgency riding high in her voice. "There's only two of them here. They're stalling for time until Pete Varham and the other man get back. Here, I'll tie them with this rope."

It seemed to Slim that they were playing like children at a man's game. These men might well be peaceable homesteaders or trappers. Still, he acted under the wild urgency in the woman's eyes.

"Put your hands behind you," he ordered, motioning with the gun. "Put your feet close together. Don't step between me and them, Pat. Get their guns."

The girl obeyed his orders.

"Aw, Sheriff," wheedled the brown-eyed balding man, "you're actin' like a idiot. You'll jest have to turn us loose."

THE man with the twisted mouth glared wickedly at Slim.

"Shut up, Beefy," he growled, "and let him make a fool out'a himself."

As Pat yanked the last knot tight she ran across the room to him, panic riding high in her eyes. "Outside, Slim, quick!" she cried. "I'll put out the light."

She stopped suddenly, her head cocked with listening. "Horses!" she exclaimed. "Running horses!"

She shook his shoulders frantically.

"Please, oh please, Slim, wake up. Pete Varham isn't like these dolts. He'll kill you without mercy—I shouldn't have brought you here. It's all my fault."

The slim man grinned triumphantly.

"Yeah," he said, "Varham'll stop your clock pronto, Sheriff."

"Carl Bergstrom, terror of Coldbrook, is about to get his come-uppance," chortled the balding man. "Oh boy, this is goin' to be good."

Carl Bergstrom! Coldbrook! The words struck his mind like bolts from the blue. Suddenly he knew who he was and where he came from—why he was here! He recalled everything that he had ever been able to remember. The bound men, leaning so insolently against the wall, seemed no longer like harmless trappers to him. The viciousness lurking beneath their smooth fronts became apparent. The old hatred that he had always had for men such as these rose up in his throat and fighting anger flooded in upon him. The bewilderment fled from his gray eyes and his jaw became a steel trap over lips that held the snarl of a panther. His big hand swept out, brushing the girl aside.

"Oh-ho!" he barked. "What's a woman doing here? Down to the floor, quick!"

His leg swung out, kicking the feet from beneath the astonished outlaws. He snatched a towel from the table, bringing his knee down cruelly on the thin man's chin. "Open your mouth, you sidewinder," he gritted, "and take this gag before I break your neck. No singing out to warn Varham."

Swiftly he gagged both men. Then he went out the door, side stepping to the

shadow of the haystack, as the thunder of approaching hoofs beat a tattoo on the canyon floor. The girl ran and stood by his side as the two horses swept into the meadow. "Get behind the stack," he rasped. "Lead's going to fly."

She hesitated, looking up into his face. "You can't face them alone," she cried. "Maybe I can do something. It was my father they killed."

"For heaven's sake," he hissed, "get out of my way. Don't interfere with the law, lady."

She looked closely at him, seeing the fire in his face for the first time. The power and force of the man stood out now in the hard and ruthless lines of his features. She found herself wondering if this new man would remember the softness of her lips, the sweetness of their kiss in the canyon.

"Yes, Slim," she said meekly, "I'll go."

Carl Bergstrom, deputy sheriff of Cornwall county, stood braced against the haystack as the two men rode up to the cabin. He saw the lithe, pantherlike form of Pete Varham swing down from his mount. The old wound that Varham had given him in Wyoming, three years back, burned on his thigh. He had more than the Haggerty score to settle with this man. The fear was gone and his mind was clear.

"What in time goes on here?" bellowed Varham to the cabin. "Charlie didn't sing out as we came in. Why is the light out this early? Rustle some grub. Me and Garth ain't et yet."

No sound came from the cabin. Instantly the outlaw stiffened. He pussyfooted away from his horse, his quick, suspicious eyes roving about the yard.

"Watch it, Garth," he hissed. "There's something wrong here."

JUST like a wild animal, Carl Bergstrom thought. He lives wild and he is wild. He's all set to kill now. Let anything move in the clearing and he'll paw for leather. The officer's eyes alone moved, shifting to Garth, waiting for the man to swing down from his mount, praying that he'd put the horse between himself and the line of fire—even for one second.

"You're too durn skittish, Pete," Garth complained. "Charlie stepped off guard a few minutes. Beefy and Cal are with him."

Garth leaned slowly over to dismount. His horse turned impatiently. As the outlaw's boots struck ground the animal stood between Garth and Bergstrom. Now was the time. The lawman stepped clear of the shadow of the stack.

Instantly Pete Varham cursed.

"Carl Bergstrom!" he roared, pivoting about, his hand darting down to his hip.

Shooting and swearing, Bergstrom thought, recalling Pat's words, as he sagged his knees, straightening his body upward with the draw. Twin orange flames lanced across the space between the two men. The tremendous reports built ghostly echoes in the buttes. Pete Varham rocked back on his heels. Then he fired a wild shot into the sod and collapsed on his face.

Garth's horse reared up, lashing out with frantic hoofs. Bergstrom leaped forward, his gun held level. "Don't try it, Garth," he warned, his voice deadly. "You're monkeyin' with the law now."

Garth released the reins, letting the frightened horse gallop toward the barn. His hand came away from his half drawn gun. His features were pasty.

"Don't shoot, Sheriff," he pleaded, as his hands went up. "I ain't tryin' for no draw."

The girl came out from behind the stack. First she walked across the intervening space, disarmed Garth and tied him up. Then her eyes were bright on Carl Bergstrom. She came close. She gathered his tired face between her hands.

"Thank God," she breathed. Two words, and no woman could have said more.

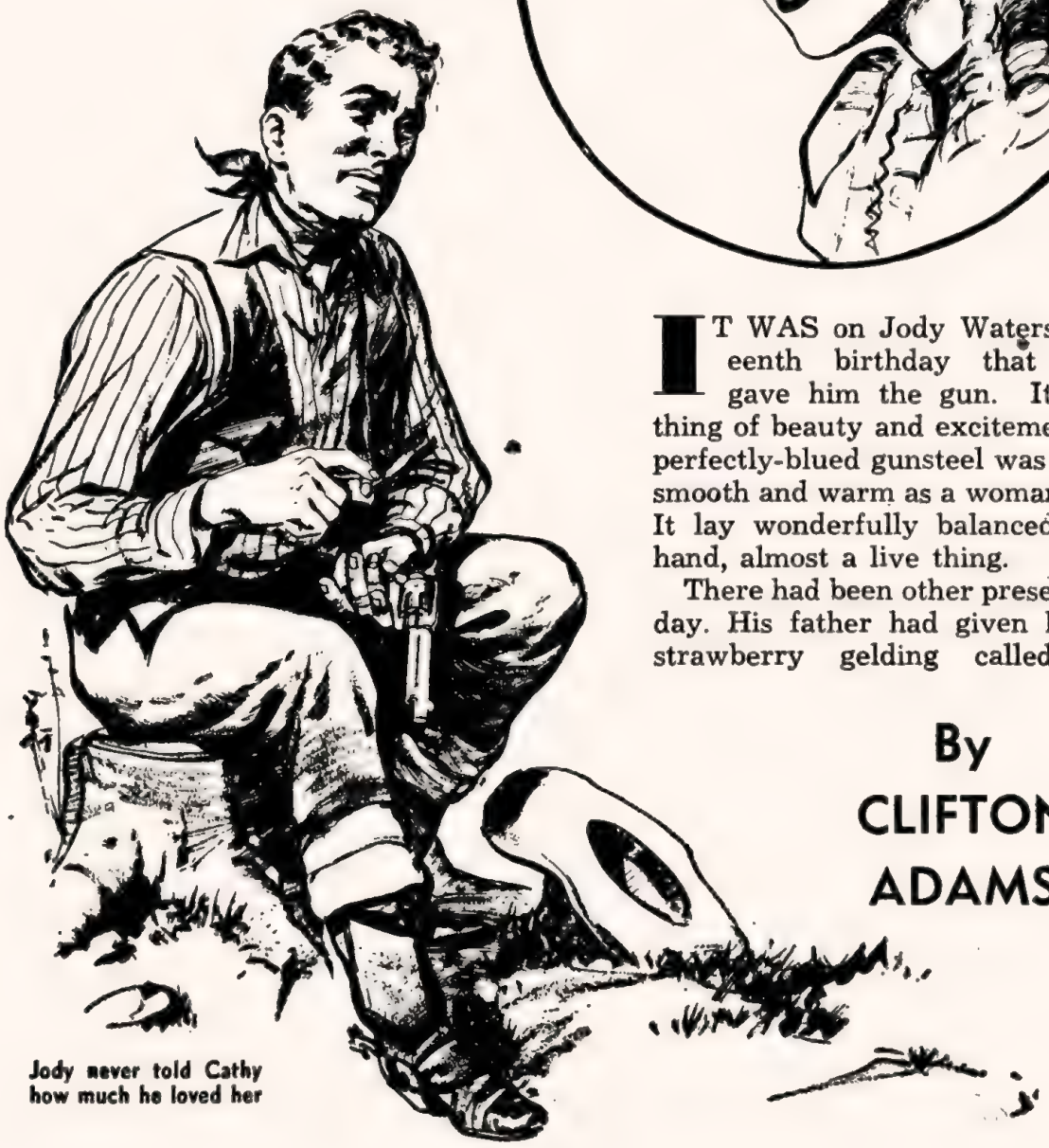
"You're mind's back again," she said, moving away. "You won't be needing me any more, Slim."

He reached out and yanked her close. "I'll be needing you, Pat," he said softly, "as long as I live."

She lifted her face and he grinned down at her. It was hard to kiss her and hold a gun on Garth at the same time. Still, with her full co-operation, he found that he could manage it nicely. • • •

THE FIRST OF MAY

Jody Waters looked beyond his legacy of hate— and reckoned the terrible price of revenge



Jody never told Cathy how much he loved her

IT WAS on Jody Waters' eighteenth birthday that Monty gave him the gun. It was a thing of beauty and excitement. The perfectly-blued gunsteel was velvety smooth and warm as a woman's skin. It lay wonderfully balanced in his hand, almost a live thing.

There had been other presents that day. His father had given him the strawberry gelding called "The

By CLIFTON ADAMS

Duke." There had been silver-mounted spurs from Cathy, and a coconut cake from his mother. But most of all Jody remembered that day because of the gun, and Monty.

May first, 1881. Jody Waters wouldn't forget that date. It had started as a good day, with a breeze cool and clean-smelling rattling the curtains at his bedroom window. He washed quickly and went down to breakfast.. The world seemed more alive than on most days. His father ate soberly as always, but couldn't hide the big grin that lay behind his eyes. Breakfast seemed to last a long time that morning, with no one, not even Jody's mother, mentioning that it was his birthday.

At last his father had said, "Son, I guess we'd better be getting out to the corral. There's horses to be shod, with the spring roundup about on us."

Jody said, "Yes, sir." He got his hat and followed his father out of the ranch house and toward the corrals. Then he saw the gelding for the first time, a proud red animal with royalty written into every line of him. He had been "The Duke" to Jody from the very first.

His father was grinning openly now. And Jody could only grin back. He didn't need words to show how he felt.

In a little while they saw the buckboard coming over the cross-country trail from the Merrideth ranch. Old Bob Merrideth had the reins, and Cathy was beside him. The buckboard pulled up by the corral and Bob Merrideth shouted, "Hullo Ben, getting shod for roundup, I see. Howdy Jody."

JODY said something politely to the older man, but he saw only Cathy. He hurried over to the buckboard and helped her down. She was smiling. Her bonnet was hanging loosely about her shoulders, and she shook her hair and the sun put stars in it. The older men walked down to the other end of the corral, talking.

Cathy said, "Pa just happened to be coming over this way. He said I might as well come along, the ride would do me good."

"I'm glad," Jody said quickly. They both grinned. Then Cathy brought a hand from behind her back and gave him the spurs.

"Happy birthday, Jody."

He took them clumsily, not knowing what to say. This was the first time a girl had ever given him a present. At last he held them up and admired them, the way he had seen men do. "Say they're something, all right!" he said. "Yes, sir, they sure are something!"

With Cathy's present, the day was almost perfect. It *would* have been perfect if Monty had been here.

Monty had been in the back of Jody's mind since the day had begun. He had seen it in his father's eyes too, but they seldom spoke of Monty now. They hadn't heard from him in more than a year—since he had killed Tony Batten in front of the Cattleman's Saloon. But they had heard things about him, the long way around, the way you always hear such things. People said Monty had been riding with the Raider gang up in Indian Territory. They said Monty had a price on his head, and blood on his hands. Jody didn't believe them. Monty was his brother.

It was almost as if thinking about Monty had made him real. Suddenly, there on an eastern ridge, a rider seemed to come out of the sun. Jody's father must have seen the rider at the same time. He made a queer little sound, then he and Mr. Merrideth came down and stood woodenly by the buckboard, watching.

Jody was the first to be sure. He couldn't mistake that odd, slouching way that Monty rode. He said, "Pa, it's Monty! It's Monty coming home!"

But his father said nothing. He seemed to grow old as the rider got closer. Jody felt strange inside. It wasn't right for a father to look that way at his son. Mr. Merrideth made an uneasy sound.

"Ben, I reckon I better be gettin' back to the spread. You know how things are in the spring. Never seem to catch up with the work cut out for you."

Jody's father wasn't listening. "Sure, Bob. It's all right."

Mr. Merrideth started to call Cathy along, but on second thought he figured that might be an insult to Jody's father. He said, "I'll send the buckboard for you this afternoon, Cathy." He whipped his horses and drove away as Monty rode up.

Monty was grinning like always. Jody ran up to him as he stepped out of the saddle. Monty took a play poke at Jody's chin and laughed.

"You're growing up, kid. Them breeches wasn't that tight the last time I saw you."

Jody laughed. Monty always made him laugh. "Sure, Monty, I guess I have, at that."

Then Monty saw Cathy, standing uncertainly there by the corral, staring at them. "I see you've got a girl, kid. You can sure pick them. I'll say that for you."

Cathy blushed, and Jody could feel his own face getting warm.

"This is Cathy Merrideth," he said quickly. "Her pa bought the old Ronson spread about a year ago."

MONTY laughed again, just because it felt good. But when he turned to his father his laughter stopped abruptly. He relaxed instinctively, with his arms hanging loosely by his guns.

He said, "Hello, Pa. It's good to be home again."

His father said flatly, "Why did you come back, Monty?"

"Is that any way to welcome your wandering son?" Monty's grin was only a half grin now. "If you must know, Pa, I came back because I wanted to see you, and Ma, and the kid. I—wanted to see Laura."

"If you go to town the Batten boys will kill you. If the sheriff doesn't." The flat voice went on. "Get on your horse, Monty, and go back to wherever you came from. Give Laura a chance to forget you. That's all you can do for her now." Then he turned and walked heavily toward the ranch house.

Silence moved in on them, a heavy, pressing thing. Jody felt sudden anger at his father. And Monty! Monty was almost a god, standing there lean and brown with those magic guns tied low on his thighs. Suddenly Monty laughed. Nothing could keep Monty from laughing.

"Pa'll get over his mad spell," he said. "He's had them before." He went over to his horse, reached in the saddle-bag and took out something wrapped in an oily rag. It was the gun. Black and cold, and wonderfully dangerous and beautiful—the way a young snake is beautiful. He gave it to Jody.

"Happy birthday, kid."

Jody took it and held it in his hands. Cathy moved closer. She stared at the gun, almost hypnotized by it.

"What's the matter, kid?" Monty said. "Don't you like it?"

"I bet there never was a better gun," Jody said as he caressed it with his fingers.

Monty grinned. "Here, let me show you how to use it. I've seen times when a man's life depend on how well he could use one of these."

He showed Johnny how to use the gun. How to draw, how to stand, how to fire. Neither of them saw the look of stark fear in Cathy's eyes as she watched.

Monty said, "That's all, kid. All you need is practice." He went to his horse and swung up to the saddle. "I'll give Pa time to cool off," he grinned. "Tell Ma I'll see her later."

Jody remembered what his father had said about the Batten boys. "Monty, you're not going in to town?"

"Sure, I'm goin' to town. I made a long ride to see Laura, and nobody's goin' to stop me."

He pulled hard on the reins and the horse reared and swung around. Jody and Cathy watched until the rider was just a speck on the horizon, until he was just a whisper of dust, until he wasn't even that. At last Cathy said:

"Who is Laura?"

"Monty's girl," Jody said. "They were going to be married, until Monty killed one of the Batten boys and had to leave

the country." Then he added. "But Laura's waiting for him. She knows nothing can keep Monty away. Anyway—I guess she loves him."

Strange things, sad things for a girl so young, happened in Cathy's eyes. But she said nothing.

The back door to the ranch house swung open and Jody's father came out. "Jody," he called, "where did your brother go?"

"To see Laura."

Mr. Waters' face paled. He said words that Jody had never heard his father say before—hard words. "That fool! Get horses saddled, Jody. If we don't stop him before he gets to town—the Battens will!"

THERE WAS almost a crazed urgency in his father's voice that made Jody's insides go cold. He said, "Cathy—" And she finished, "It's all right, Jody, I'll stay with your mother."

He raced to the barn, got the saddles, and hurried back to the corral where the horses were. The Duke seemed to smell the excitement. He pawed the ground and tossed his head wildly as Jody struggled with the cinch fastenings.

The rest was all a part of a crazy dream, the kind of dream where you run and run and never get anywhere. The flat Texas prairie stretched endlessly in all directions. Jody punished the Duke for more speed, even as his father was punishing his own horse, and still they seemed not to move.

Then suddenly it ended, the way all dreams end. The prairie vanished and the town was before them. They raced their horses into the main street, past the livery stable. Then, at the end of the street, they saw a crowd.

It was an aimless, milling crowd of shocked faces. Jody's father said hoarsely, "You stay back, Jody. I'll see what's wrong." But Jody dropped down from his saddle and pushed into the crowd.

"He should of known better," somebody said. "The Batten boys were out to get him. I can't say I blame them."

Somebody else said, "He had it comin'. Been ridin' with the Raider gang, I hear."

Somebody else spoke, "Shut up, you fool. There's old man Waters and the kid."

It was all a crazy babble. Jody heard the words but they had no meaning. He wouldn't let them mean anything. He pushed and shoved, and suddenly the crowd parted and let him through.

For just an instant he stood frozen. Monty lay there on the ground, twisted crazily in that rag doll fashion that always means the same thing. Jody dropped on his knees, and the world swam.

"Monty!"

Monty opened his eyes slowly. He moved his mouth enough to say, "Hello, kid."

"Monty, I'll get them! Every one of those Battens, if it's the last thing I do!"

Monty worked his mouth. "Take it easy, kid—" He almost went to sleep with his eyes open. Then he roused himself and seemed to bring his mind back from far away. "You got to take—it easy," he said. "Promise me, kid, you won't do anything now. When you're twenty-one you can do anything you want. But not now."

"I promise, Monty. I——"

Then Monty grinned. "Tell Laura—"

He never finished what he was going to say.

Jody felt his father's arms around his shoulders. "Come on, Jody." Jody got to his feet. He threw off his father's arms and shouted at the crowd of stupid faces.

"I'm going to kill the Battens for this! Ralph Batten, and Joe, and Roy, every one of them!"

Someone in the back of the crowd laughed. "Are you going after them now, kid?"

Jody couldn't see who it was. His eyes were bleary and stinging. "No, not now. I'll wait till I'm twenty-one, like my brother wanted."

The town thought it was a good joke, a kid like Jody Waters going after the Batten brothers. What made it so funny was that he had given himself three years to change his mind in.

"What are you going to do," they would ask Ralph Batten, or Joe, or Roy, "when

the kid gets to be twenty-one and comes gunning for you?"

"Turn him over my knee," the Battens would laugh "and wear him out with an elm switch."

Yes sir, it was a big joke, and it got a lot of laughs—for the first few months.

SOON, in one way or another, stories of what Jody was doing began to go around. Old Doc Jenson went out on a baby call one night to the Double-O-X ranch. Coming back in the first light of dawn, he heard gunfire over in the direction of the Waters' spread. Doc, being the curious kind, topped a ridge to have a look, and there was Jody out on the bald prairie, before the sun had even come up, shooting at a cardboard box.

"Must have waited there fifteen, twenty minutes," Doc said. "There he was. He'd shoot fast as he could and walk over to the box and see how he done. Then he'd reload and do it over again."

A year went by and there were more stories. But more than two years passed before Allen Blake came back with the one that stopped the laughter for good.

"You know my spread borders the Waters' outfit on the south," Blake said. "Well, a coyote had just butchered two of my calves and I decided to go after him. I was down in the draw close to the Waters' place when I heard the shooting. I figured right then that it was Jody getting in some target practice on the jackrabbits; they're thick as flies there."

"But I wasn't ready for what I actually saw," Blake said. And this was the part that stopped the laughing. "There was Jody Waters with a forty-five tied down to his leg, gunman fashion. He'd turn his back to the brush pile till he heard a jackrabbit scamper out, then he'd wheel, and that forty-five would jump in his hand so fast that I couldn't tell how it happened. He'd shoot that rabbit before he finished his first jump. Not once, but a dozen times. He didn't miss."

Then Allen Blake added, "It looks like we laughed too soon at Jody Waters. I sure wouldn't want to be in the Batten boys' place on the first of May when Jody gets to be twenty-one."

The first of May. It was a date that was never out of Jody Waters' mind. He had changed since that day almost three years ago—he felt it.

He had his mind made up, and nobody was going to stop him. Neither Cathy, nor his father, nor Laura. . . . Sometimes as he lay awake at nights waiting for that day, he would think of Laura. Her eyes were like windows in empty houses. There was nothing in her since Monty was gone.

Cathy was still the same. Oh, she had grown up; she wasn't a girl any longer. But inside she was still the same. Her father didn't bring her to the Waters' ranch any more. And he wouldn't let Jody come to see her. Mr. Merrideth was afraid of him. A lot of people had grown afraid of Jody. But not Cathy.

When he needed her she was there. When his mind was black and his brain ached with hate, then Cathy would always find a way to see him and make it easier.

Jody never told her how much he loved her. Something had kept him from doing that. He would say, "Cathy, when it's over, then things will be different. Don't you see, it's something I've got to do? As long as the Battens are alive and Monty is dead, I can't rest. Can you see that?"

But she never answered him. She would touch his forehead with her fingers and say meaningless little things, almost as if he were a child. But she never answered his question.

Early in March Ralph Batten took the south bound stage for El Paso to see about buying some cattle. He didn't come back.

"It won't do him any good to run," Allen Blake said. "I saw Jody Waters' face that day when he was shooting them jackrabbits. It won't do Ralph a bit of good to run, because sooner or later Jody'll get him."

THE NEXT month Joe Batten hired out with a trail herd going to Abilene. Only Roy Batten was left. When his friends tried to get him to go away

before the first of May, he said:

"I've got my family here, and it don't seem right that I should jerk them up and run over the country like gypsies. Anyway, it wouldn't do any good. Jody Waters has got his mind made up."

A breeze, cool and clean-smelling, rattled the curtains at Jody's bedroom window. The sky was gray the color of lead, and only in the east was there a little ribbon of light where the sun would rise. It was a morning in spring with the smell of green things growing. It was the same as any other spring morning, except this was the beginning of May, and Jody was twenty-one years old.

Jody got out of bed, pulled on his clothes and splashed his face in a bowl of water. He didn't feel any different. Why should he? How many nights had he lain awake and lived this day in his mind? How many nights were in three years?

He went downstairs quietly before the house awaked. He got his saddle from the barn and put it on the strawberry gelding. Before he swung up he checked his .45 carefully, caressing the fine cold steel with his fingers. Then he tied his holster down with leather thongs just above the knee. He was ready.

It was a long ride, but he was in no particular hurry. He had plans for Ralph and Joe Batten, but it was Roy that he was riding after now. There was plenty of time—a whole lifetime, if it took that long.

The sun was high when he rode into town. He left his horse at the livery barn, not because the gelding needed care, but because the liverymen were more talkative than most people.

Jody learned that Roy Batten had come to town in a wagon, with his wife and children. The liveryman didn't know where they were now. Jody tried a feed store and a saloon. He did it methodically, trying every place in town until he found the right one.

Men had taken their horses off the street and out of the line of fire. Tight faces pressed to glass windows, watching as he went from one store to the other.

Jody stopped on the plankwalk and scanned the false-fronted buildings across the street. He felt nothing. He had done this so many times in his mind that there was no feeling for it in him. He waited. And listened.

The street was deserted. A gust of hot wind rippled the red dust and scattered it in a powdery spray. A dry leaf rattled. Then, in this seemingly dead town, a door opened. Roy Batten stood across the street in front of a general store.

Almost mechanically Jody turned and started walking toward him. He measured the distance with his eyes, and in the back of his mind he heard Monty instructing him, the way he had that day three years ago when he had given him the gun.

"A good gun is a beautiful thing," Monty had said. "Guns and women, they're all beautiful, but some are more so. Take this forty-five. I could have got you a lighter gun, say a thirty-eight. With a gun like that you could draw faster, aim better, and shoot straighter. Why didn't I get you a thirty-eight instead of a forty-five? Muzzle blast. Here's the way it works, kid. There's only one place a hand gun will do you any good. Close quarters. Did you ever hear of a gunfight taking place with the men a hundred yards apart? Twenty feet is more like it. Or even less. When a forty-five goes off in a man's face at twenty feet, what happens? He falls back, he's staggered and numb, even if you missed him. With a lighter gun you could shoot a hole in him, and he still might pull his gun and kill you. Take this forty-five and get to know it well."

JODY knew his gun well. When he judged the distance to be twenty feet he stopped.

Roy Batten's face was pale. The door behind him opened and a thin woman came out with a skinny, tow-headed kid hanging onto her skirts. Roy Batten made a quick motion with his head.

"Get back inside," he said hoarsely. "There's nothing you can do about it now."

But she didn't move. Roy Batten's wife

stood rigidly beside her husband, staring at Jody. "Why do you have to kill?" she said. "Are all you Waters crazy, like Monty?"

Jody said nothing. If she wanted to stand there, there was nothing he could do. He felt himself relax, and his hand curled just the least bit beside his holster, waiting for Roy Batten to draw.

Roy said, "For God's sake, Jody, does it have to be this way?"

There was still nothing for Jody to say. He watched the nerves in Roy Batten's face pull his mouth tight and make the corner of his right eye jump crazily. He didn't feel any satisfaction in knowing that the man was scared. He felt little of anything. Almost absently, from the corner of his eye, he glanced at Roy's wife. Her face—there was something about it that was familiar. There was a feeling that he had seen that face before.

Then he knew where he had seen it. It hadn't been Roy's wife. It had been Laura. There had been the same look in her eyes when they told her that Monty was dead.

"Look, Jody," Roy Batten's words rushed out. "I'll leave town—I'll do anything you say, only don't use that gun!"

The kid hanging onto his mother's skirts. How old was he? Six? Seven? There was enough hate in his eyes to last him a lifetime. He would be growing up before long. He would grow up with a gun in his hand, learning how to use it, even better than Jody maybe. Some day the kid would be coming after Jody the way Jody was after his pa. Some day. But that was a long time off, and it was hardly real now.

"Anything, Jody! Anything you say!"

It was the woman's face that interested him. And he didn't know why. What did it matter if she reminded him of Laura? Laura had been Monty's girl, not his.

Then he knew. The person that this woman reminded him of wasn't Laura. That helpless look and those dead eyes had nothing to do with Laura. It was Cathy's face they brought to mind.

There was a nervous shuffle of feet inside the general store at Roy Batten's back. They were waiting for the kill. Then they'd swarm around like vultures, the way they had swarmed around Monty that day.

What would Monty have done if he could have seen ahead, the way Jody was seeing? Would he have killed the Batten boy if he could have seen the change it would make in Laura's face? Jody felt himself tighten. A nerve along his arm and shoulder pulled tight and made a muscle quiver in his face.

"Jody, for God's sake!"

Suddenly Jody was walking. He had turned his back on Roy Batten, and his wife, and his kid, and he was walking as fast as he could toward the other end of the street. The vultures came out and stared, but Jody didn't look back.

It was a long ride back to the ranch and Jody took his time, for he had a lot of thinking to do. Word would get around fast about the way he had turned his back on Roy Batten, but he didn't think of that. He thought of Monty who hadn't been able to see ahead—until it was too late. Then he knew why Monty had made him wait those three years. As Monty lay dying it had been too late to help himself for Laura, but he could give Jody a chance to look ahead and make sure the same thing wouldn't happen to him and Cathy.

His father was waiting for him at the corral as Jody stepped down from the saddle.

"Doc Jenson was by a few minutes ago," his father said. "He said it was awful quiet in town this morning."

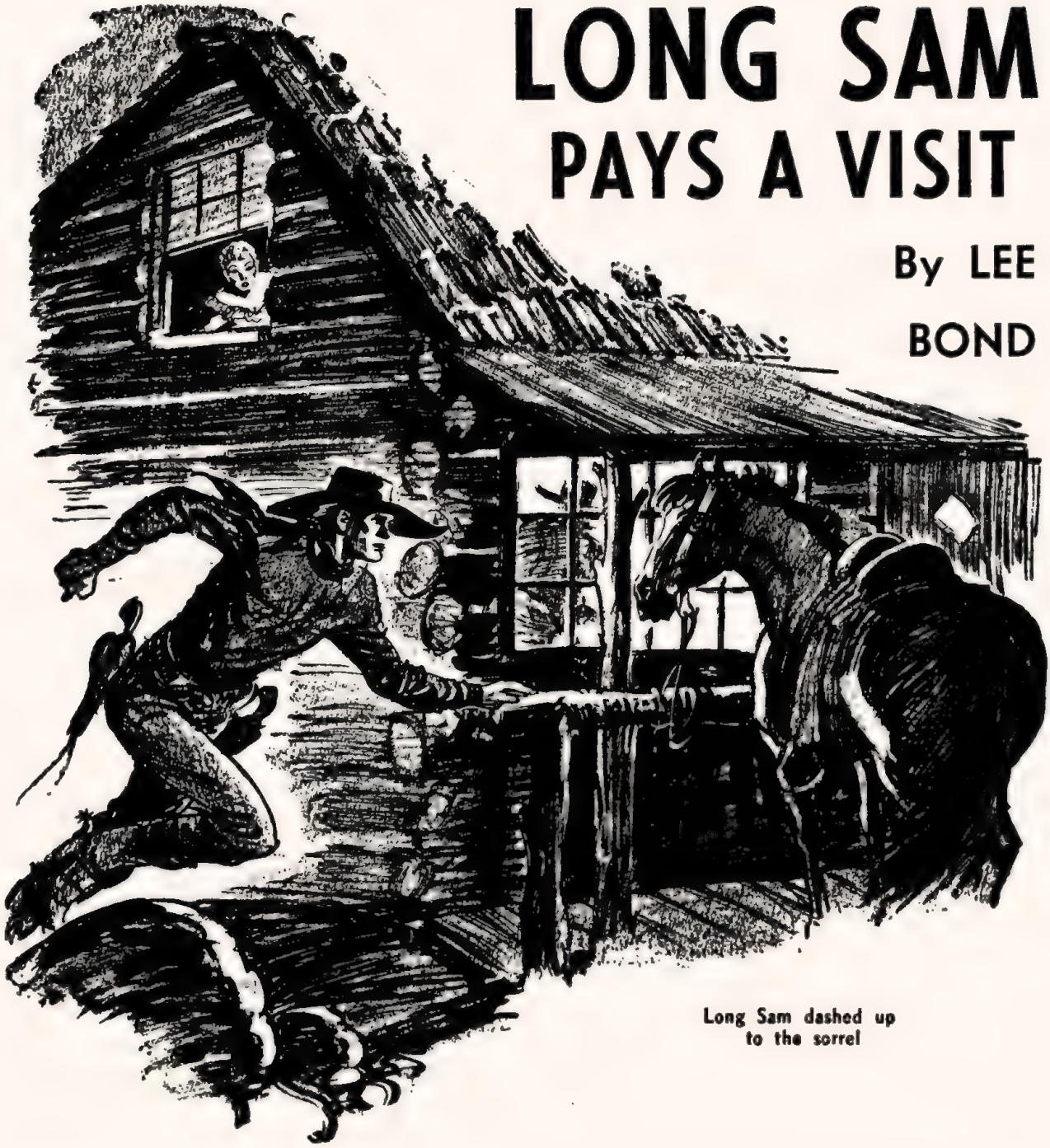
Jody busied himself with the strawberry's saddle. "Yes, sir," he said. "It was quiet."

Then Jody looked up and saw the buckboard coming over the cross-country trail from the Merrideth ranch. Old Bob Merrideth had the reins, and Cathy was beside him. Jody's father looked strange. There were almost forgotten wrinkles at the corners of his mouth, and a warmness in his eyes that had been gone for three long years.

"Happy birthday, Jody," he said. He was grinning.

LONG SAM PAYS A VISIT

By LEE BOND



Long Sam dashed up to the sorrel

TO STRANGERS who viewed it the town of Bentol must have appeared to be little more than a cluster of weathered log buildings squatting in a clearing that had been hacked from the Texas Piney woods. The one short street across which the business buildings faced each other was dirty, swarming with flea-ridden dogs, scrawny chickens, grimy youngsters, pine-rooter hogs and such wandering animals as milch cows, mules, goats and horses.

A little well-placed gunfire worked wonders when a homecoming owlhooter ran into a welter of looting and assorted mischief!

Travelers tarried in the place only when circumstances forced them to it. It was the opinion of such unfortunates that the town would be better off burned, and the always encroaching forests allowed to reclaim the ground.

But for all of its lack of prosperity and civic pride Bentol was, to Long Sam Littlejohn, all things good. The town's citizens were not only too lazy to listen, but too incurious to care what was said when strange lawmen came among them telling of cash wealth to be had by the man or men who killed or captured Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw. And the Bentol sheriff, Jim Murry, was the kind of sheriff Long Sam wished all Texas counties had.

Sheriff Murry weighed slighty more than three hundred pounds, and molested no man who behaved while within his county's limits. He explained away his total lack of interest in "Wanted" dodgers that came through the mail simply by pointing out that he was too near-sighted to read the dodgers.

"Good old Bentol, at last, Sleeper!" Long Sam Littlejohn said wearily as he glimpsed the town from a fringe of the piney woods that hemmed it in.

The dust of long trails lay upon Long Sam's jet-black hat, shirt, pants and boots, and every bone in his gaunt, unusually tall body achingly reminded him that he had been many hours astride the tough, bad-tempered old roan he called Sleeper. He felt the roan quicken pace and slanted in across the clearing towards Bentol's east end, his weary eyes finding there the only decently kept dwelling the town could boast.

Sleeper shook himself into a shortlope and Long Sam chuckled, saying aloud, "So you're thinking of the corn that'll be in Avery Morgan's crib. I'm thinking how good Carlotta's cooking will taste, so let's go visiting, fella."

LONG SAM rode in behind Avery Morgan's neat log house and stopped under a moss-hung oak that shaded the whole back yard. The well was there, and Sleeper shoved his nose into a tub of cool water that stood under the pump. Long Sam dismounted and moved towards the back steps, nostrils twitching when he smelled frying meat and the sour-sweet smell of buttermilk biscuits baking.

"Anybody home?" he called.

He heard a pan rattle on stove lids inside the kitchen, then Carlotta Morgan's light steps were coming toward the back door. Long Sam went up the sandstone steps and stopped in the doorway, pulling the dusty hat from his touseled yellow hair. Carlotta called his name and was suddenly before him, putting her slender arms around him and pressing hard against him.

"Hello, lovely lady," Long Sam said easily. "Do I get invited to share the food I smell cooking?"

A grin that had come to Long Sam's wide mouth vanished quickly. Carlotta did not answer. Long Sam felt her arms tighten, and was warned of something amiss by her trembling. Her face was pressed hard against Long Sam's left shoulder. He studied the soft waves of her rich brown hair and waited, a sense of unease coming to him.

"What's wrong, girl?" he asked finally.

Carlotta gave him a quick pressure of her arms, then stepped away. Her full, red lips twisted in an odd grin as she looked up at him, brushing tears from her cheeks.

"You're wolf-lean, trail-gaunted and hollow-eyed, Sam," Carlotta said. "But you look wonderful, to me. At least I'll not have to eat supper alone tonight."

"What are you getting at, girl?" Long Sam asked almost crossly. "And where is Avery?"

"I'm talking about a gal who is so glad to have someone besides herself to talk to she had to cry about it," Carlotta said, laughing. "Avery is probably having supper with his lady-love, just now. Put up your horse while I get more steak and biscuits started, Sam. And don't ask questions now or I'll be weepy again."

"All right, I'll ask no questions," Long Sam said wearily. "Give me time to bathe in the creek back of the barn so's I'll be fit

to sit at your table."

Long Sam stabled and fed the weary roan, then lugged his warbag down to the spring branch back of the barn, and got clean clothing out of the bag. He took a swim in water so cold it shocked most of the fatigue out of him. Then he dressed, slung his warbag over one shoulder, and returned to the house, hunger a gnawing ache in him as he stepped into the kitchen and smelled the food cooking.

"Take your things to the same room you've always used, Sam," Carlotta said, smiling.

Long Sam went to the back part of the house and into a small, bright room, tossing his warbag on a deep, soft bed. He unfastened pliant black belts that supported a brace of big pistols, putting the gear down on a chair near the bed.

When he got back to the kitchen Carlotta was putting food on the table and said almost gaily, "Such as it is, let's eat, Sam. And let no mention of my errant husband be made, please."

Long Sam ate as he had eaten other meals of Carlotta's cooking, stuffing himself beyond the point of comfort and enjoying each morsel of the food. When the meal was finished and he had eaten deep-dish apple pie that was something to remember, he leaned contentedly back and built a cigarette, watching Carlotta as she sat soberly toying with her coffee cup.

"Where shall I begin, Sam?" she asked, looking at him levelly.

"Start anywhere you want to, girl," Long Sam said.

"I suppose you've heard of the Looters, haven't you?" she asked another question.

"Of course I've heard of that pack of killing highwaymen, Carlotta. Do they have something to do with whatever is troubling you?"

"Avery is the leader of that pack, Sam!" Carlotta said evenly, carefully.

STARING at the young and lovely face across the table from him, Long Sam sat utterly still. Carlotta's dark eyes were sad and shadowed with hurt, but they were steady under Long Sam's boring, probing gaze.

Long Sam gave his head a slow shake, said, "I know Avery is reckless. Most professional gamblers are. But I can't believe he's a cold-blooded thief and killer, Carlotta."

"You know that he's a thief at heart, Sam," Carlotta said quietly. "Just before the war started, you saved his life, down in Corpus, when a bunch of men caught him cheating them during a card game."

"Avery was cheating at cards, that's true," Long Sam said. "But he was young then, and the beating those men gave him no doubt taught him a lesson. I'll admit, however, that I've always regretted taking him to your father's ranch to recuperate. I'm afraid your dad still blames me for dragging home a handsome gambler for you to fall in love with."

"If you had not joined the Army and marched away to help fight the Yankees you wouldn't have let me marry Avery, would you?" Carlotta asked musingly.

Long Sam said, "No, I wouldn't have let you marry Avery. But you're married to him, Carlotta, and now you're telling me that he's the leader of the worst pack of killers who ever operated along this or any other Texas cattle trail. Why do you think Avery is mixed up in any such thing, girl?"

"To tell you all the little things that added together and finally spelled out the horrifying truth to me would take the whole night, Sam," Carlotta said gravely. "But I know positively that Avery is the leader of those terrible Looters."

"I think you're mistaken," Long Sam said bluntly. "You said something about Avery having a lady friend. If you've let yourself get jealous over some gal, Carlotta, couldn't this other thing you're thinking about your husband stem from that jealousy?"

"You darned men!" Carlotta said bitterly. "Go see Avery and see for yourself how coarse and sullen and secretive he has become. And meet his lady-love, too. Then get yourself back here and help me decide what to do, Sam. I'm deathly afraid of Avery, now."

"If even part of the things you think about Avery have any truth behind them you should have got out of here," Long Sam said gruffly.

"I tried that—just once," Carlotta told him gravely.

"How the devil could Avery stop you if you wanted to leave?" Long Sam countered sharply.

He saw mockery come into Carlotta's dark eyes. She reached up and back with both hands, working at the back of her dress neck. She stood up and turned her back suddenly, and Long Sam gave a kind of muffled yelp of astonishment. Carlotta had unfastened her dress from neck to waist down the back and pulled the cloth of it forward toward the tips of her shoulders. On her slender back and shoulders were so many crooked red scars Long Sam made no attempt to even estimate their number.

Slowly, he said, "Hell's fire, girl!" Somebody used a whip on you, it looks like."

"Avery did when I tried to leave here," Carlotta said gravely. "He took every stitch off me, then used his quirt. I can't say how long he whipped me because I fainted after the pain got bad. But my whole body is scarred just the way my back and shoulders are, Sam. Or do you suspect that I'm just imagining that I've other scars besides those you can see?"

Gravely, Long Sam said, "I'm sorry I was slow to believe you, Carlotta. But that damn tinhorn will wish he hadn't used that quirt on you, girl."

CARLOTTA fastened her dress, then turned and looked up at Long Sam, who had come to his feet and was trying desperately to mask the fury that was boiling in him. Carlotta caught and held his glance, a wry and yet somehow gentle smile on her red lips.

She shook her head, said, "No heroics, Sam. I showed you those scars to stop you from thinking I'm just a jealous wife trying to make her husband sound like an ogre, out of spite. I'm not jealous over a man for whom I feel only fear and loathing. You go see Avery and meet his Susie, and I think you'll understand."

"Susie is his girl's name?" Long Sam asked.

Carlotta bobbed her head. "Susie Quinn. She's a squatty little redhead with a lot of white showing in her big green eyes and too much wiggle in the caboose when she walks. Or does that sound like more jealous wife nonsense?"

"Quit rubbing it in, girl!" Long Sam grumbled. "And tell me where to find Avery and his Susie, if you happen to know."

Carlotta said, "Susie owns and operates the Pine Tree Inn. It is three miles south of town, where the road fords Chocolate Creek."

"What kind of place is the Pine Tree Inn?" Long Sam asked.

"It is a flashy deadfall where travelers can stop and eat, drink, gamble, dance with house women and perhaps be incautious enough to display wealth that would interest the Looters," Carlotta answered promptly. "Go see the place, meet Susie, and let Avery know that you've stopped by to pay us a visit."

"What I'd like to let that tinhorn know is how fast a bullet can take him to hell!" Long Sam said gruffly. "But I don't have to go out to that dive to be convinced that you've told me the whole truth, Carlotta. Any man who'd beat a woman the way Avery beat you is capable of anything that is low and— Get down!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a harsh shout. The sun was down and dusk was falling, yet the gaunt outlaw knew that he had seen a man's face at the kitchen window. He saw Carlotta crouch beside the table as he dashed for the back door, cursing bitterly when his hands slapped gunless thighs. He cleared the steps in a spreading jump and dashed to the corner of the house, peering around in time to see a running man vanish in pine timber a hundred yards beyond the house.

"What's wrong, Sam?" Carlotta called from the back door.

Long Sam returned to the kitchen, explaining about the man he had seen. He

was surprised and almost vexed when Carlotta laughed amusedly.

"What's funny about that devil snooping around listening to what we were saying?" he asked crossly.

"In the first place, Avery has me watched constantly to make certain that I don't try to run away again," Carlotta said. "Besides, Sam, I imagine that snoop was so busy staring when I showed you my scarred back that he did little listening."

Bitterly, Long Sam said, "That snoop no doubt heard plenty through that open window. And he'll tell Avery what you were saying to me, too. Who is in this Looters pack with Avery?"

"Avery is the only one I can name, Sam," the girl said. "I don't even know how many men he has working with him. But that Pine Tree Inn of Susie's is no doubt their hangout."

"And that snoop is no doubt on his way to Susie's place now to make his report," Long Sam said. "Maybe I'd better see Avery before he gets boiling too high over you telling me about the beating he gave you. But old Sleeper is fagged out, Carlotta. Mind if I borrow a horse from your barn?"

Carlotta looked at Long Sam thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "Help yourself to any horse on the place, Sam. Is there a posse after you?"

Long Sam grinned sourly, said, "A posse was after me most of last week. Joe Fry, a deputy United States Marshal who works out of Austin, jumped me up in Dallas and lit out after me with a bunch of glory hunters. I threw them off my trail up in the Postoak Belt, but didn't stop to do any resting.— You lock your doors and stay inside until I get back, Carlotta."

WHEN LONG SAM reached the Pine Tree Inn he felt that he had his temper reasonably well under control. He studied the well-lighted entrance to the deadfall carefully.

The building was bigger than most roadside gump-traps, being a two-storied affair. It was built of peeled native pine logs, and Long Sam noticed that close-spaced windows in the upper story all showed smudges of light around drawn blinds.

He swung off the big sorrel gelding he had borrowed and tied the horse among other saddlers at a long bar. Then walked to the front door and stepped into a room that was so brightly lighted he halted, blinking uncertainly.

"Hello there, Sam!" a deep, rough voice greeted. "I seen you ride into town today. First time you've been around in quite a spell."

Long Sam glanced off to his right and located the speaker. The fellow was Ed Millikin, who owned and ran the only blacksmith shop in Bentol. He was sitting alone at a table and jerked a shaggy black head in an invitation for Long Sam to join him. The outlaw started to refuse, but changed his mind when he saw the huge figure of Sheriff Jim Murry. The sheriff was making his cautious way towards Millikin's table, carrying a big pitcher of cold beer and three heavy beer mugs.

"Hello, Jim," Long Sam greeted as the sheriff drew close.

"Why, hello there—uh—yeah, hello." The sheriff stammered, blinking at Long Sam through big spectacles.

Ed Millikin grinned and winked a pale blue eye at Long Sam. The sheriff got the pitcher and mugs safely on the table top, then leaned over and pushed his huge face and shiny glasses close to Long Sam's gaunt face.

"Dern you, Sam!" the sheriff grumbled. "I knowed your voice but couldn't remember who's it was. And you just let me flounder. But set and have a cold beer. How you been?"

"I'm making out," Long Sam said warily. "Were you and Ed expecting me, or is that third mug for somebody else?"

The sheriff had cautiously lowered his vast bulk into a chair. Long Sam was looking down at him, seeing his face in profile. The outlaw was surprised to discover that the sheriff's glasses were constructed of amazingly thin glass, although

when viewed from the front they appeared to be extremely thick.

"Of course Ed and me wasn't expecting you, Sam," the sheriff said lazily. "Why'd you think that, anyhow?"

"You fetched three mugs from the bar with that beer," Long Sam pointed out.

"This third mug is for Dan Shaddock, who sashayed off to chin with some of the house gals," Ed Millikin said casually. "Light and have a beer, Sam. Dan can hustle another mug when he shows up."

"Thanks, but I'll pass," Long Sam said. "I dropped down to see Avery Morgan, so I'll go hunt him."

"If you come to see Avery, you may as well set down and cool your heels a while," the sheriff declared.

"Avery isn't around?" Long Sam asked, fully aware that the two men at the table were determined to have him join them.

"Avery sure ain't here, Sam," Ed Millikin declared. "Me and Jim and Dan Shaddock have been setting at this table for over two hours, gabbing and sipping beer."

Long Sam felt a kindling of excitement. Ed Millikin had lied stupidly when he claimed to have been sitting at that table for a couple of hours with two other men, drinking beer. The pitcher and the three mugs the sheriff had just put on the table were leaving wet rings on the dark varnish. And those were the only wet smudges anywhere on the table. Millikin's lie had therefore been a stupid one, for certainly the table would have been thoroughly marked by pitcher and mug if three men had sat there drinking beer for two hours.

"Park yourself, Sam!' the sheriff said gruffly. "When Avery comes in you'll know it, for he circulates around the place all the time."

"Later, maybe," Long Sam said cheerfully. "Right now I want to just mosey around and look the place over."

HE MOVED off, but not until he had seen a flush creep up the sheriff's huge neck and spread over his face. And Ed Millikin's pale eyes had glinted as if the man had suddenly turned angry. That the two men had meant to detain him at their table there was no doubt, yet Long Sam could find no explanation for that.

"It could," he thought, "have something to do with that snoop who had undoubtedly come here and reported to Avery Morgan." Long Sam wished he knew for sure, and glanced back at the sheriff and Ed Millikin. They were watching him and talking, their heads close together.

"Susie Quinn wants to see you, Littlejohn!" a voice said.

Long Sam faced quickly forward, shock going through him. Two men had moved in on him as he looked back at the sheriff and Ed Millikin. One man was on Long Sam's right, the other on his left. They were burly, sleek men and had the look of fellows who rarely felt the touch of sun on their skins.

They grinned at Long Sam's obvious surprise and unease, moving in so close he could feel the pressure of their bodies against his arms. The man on his right was ruddy-faced, and had wavy reddish hair that was carefully combed. The man on Long Sam's left was sallow and black-eyed, and had bristly black hair clipped close to his skull.

"Act natural and just keep moving towards the stairs at the back of the room yonder, Littlejohn," the dark man said guardedly. "Buzz and me can get rough, if we have to."

Sourly, Long Sam said, "Buzz would be short for Buzzard, no doubt. And he's red-necked, too."

"That remark gives me first bite at this string-bean, Cole," Buzz said to his dark companion.

Long Sam marched down the big room and climbed carpeted stairs that lifted up to a narrow hallway that was lighted by bracket lamps. Closed doorways faced each other across the hall but Long Sam gave the unnumbered doors only fleeting glances. He was watching a door at the far end of the hall open, then close behind a scrawny man who wore a green eyeshade that shadowed his narrow face.

"Susie is sure on a tear, Cole," this little man said grumpily. "I went into the office and asked her why Avery got so mad and pulled out in such a rush after Dan Shaddock come buzzin' in a while ago, and she cussed me for everything—"

"Go cut your throat, Charlie," Cole interrupted.

"Or keep wagging your jaw, and Cole and me will get orders to do it for you!" Buzz added coldly.

Charlie blinked at them, looked directly at Long Sam for the first time, then hurried off along the hall, muttering. Long Sam tried to throttle the fear that came into him when he realized what Avery Morgan's sudden and angry departure from this roadside deadfall probably meant. He moved on along the hall to the door at the end, Cole and Buzz watching him. Cole reached out and pecked on the door with a lumpy fist, then dropped his hand to the knob and opened the door.

"In you go, noose-bait!" Buzz said gruffly, and started to reach for Long Sam's shoulder.

Long Sam went into the office, but not in the manner his two guards had expected. The gaunt outlaw sprang forward into the room, whirling and slamming the heavy oak door. The door slapped solidly into the astonished faces of Buzz and Cole, but Long Sam had to pound it on shut with a thrusting shoulder. He heard the two bruisers cursing luridly and rammed home a heavy steel bolt just as one of them lunged powerfully against the door.

A screech of mingling rage and alarm behind him brought Long Sam around fast, his smoke-colored eyes whipping to a dumpy, flashily clad woman who had high-piled red hair and big green eyes that showed too much white. The woman was hopping out from behind an ornate desk, mouthing sulphuric remarks as she cocked and started leveling a nickel-plated pistol. She looked just mean and angry enough to use it, too, so it required quick thinking on Long Sam's part.

LONG SAM snatched his hat off and flung it at the woman's face. She dodged instinctively, the pistol in her hand popping sharply. The bullet flew a yard high because she had dodged, however, and Long Sam lunged at her, seizing a pudgy wrist behind the pistol as she tried to cock it again.

He clapped his left hand over her shoulder and shook her until the red hair spilled down over her face and the pistol flew out of her hand. The redhead tried a kick at his groin, but he shoved her away from him, booting her fancy pistol across the office into a far corner.

"I'm Sam Littlejohn, Susie," the outlaw said gravely. "A couple of your flunkies mentioned that you wanted to see me."

Susie was panting and pawing hair out of her face and so angry she was shaking. She looked toward the door that was rattling under an attack by Buzz and Cole, then brought her blazing eyes back to Long Sam. She cursed him, then said, "Dan Shaddock overheard Carlotta telling you a pack of damned lies about Avery. I wanted you to come up here and hear the truth."

"Avery got mad when that Shaddock snoop reported to him and headed for home, didn't he?" Long Sam asked.

"Of course Avery went home!" Susie retorted. "Dan Shaddock said Carlotta took her dress off and showed you the scars Avery put on her for sticking her nose into his business, a while back. I'll bet the little trollop has got some new scars, by now."

"Dan Shaddock is a dirty liar if he says Carlotta took her dress off," Long Sam said flatly. "And if Avery Morgan uses his quirt on Carlotta again, you'll be huntin' a new meal ticket, Susie!"

Long Sam picked up his hat, put it on, then walked across the room to a window that was covered by heavy blue velvet drapes. He pulled the drapes apart, looking out an open window into the black night.

"Go ahead and jump!" Susie sneered. "If the fall don't break your neck Cole

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and Buzz will, when they get that door open."

Long Sam ignored her. He yanked the drapes off the rod that held them up, then quickly tore each panel down the middle. He knotted the ends of the four pieces together, secured one end of the crude rope to Susie's desk, and tossed the rest of the material out the window.

"Quit that!" Susie squalled when it finally dawned on her what Long Sam meant to do.

Long Sam straddled the window sill, took the soft strip of strong velvet in both hands, then dropped into the night. Susie yelled in rage and dashed for the window, but the big desk skidded and came up against the wall with a clatter and kept her from reaching the window.

Long Sam could hear her yelling shrilly, and he went downward at a dizzy speed, knowing that she would find some way to give him trouble unless he got out of there pronto. He came down so fast he almost fell when his feet slammed the ground, but caught his balance and dashed around the back of the building and to the front.

He untied the big sorrel and went up into the saddle, saying grimly, "Sift out of here, pony. And I hope you've got some speed!"

The big sorrel was fast and willing to run, yet it seem to Long Sam that he had been roaring through the night for hours before he saw Bentol's lights ahead. He slowed the foam-dappled sorrel and went along the town's main street at a modest canter, not wanting to arouse curiosity by traveling too fast.

When he approached the Morgan place the windows showed no light, and Long Sam felt fear make a hard lump in the pit of his stomach. He stopped the sorrel well out from the house, swung out of the saddle, and advanced on foot. The fear in him was for Carlotta, the lack of lights in the house making that fear mount steadily.

"Avery could have beaten her unconscious again and left, although I'd probably have met him on the road," Long

Sam murmured in uneasiness. "Or maybe that damn tinhorn took Carlotta away somewhere, fearing I'd get back here before he could finish mauling her."

CIRCLING the house at a safe distance, the worry deepened in Long Sam's mind when he found no horse anywhere about the yard. He moved finally toward the front porch, intending to go into the house and look around, yet dreading to for fear of what he might find.

He was lifting a foot to feel for the steps when he heard Carlotta's voice inside the house. Avery Morgan's voice answered instantly and with insulting words. They were in the front room in the dark, and Long Sam eased back from the steps with utmost care, moving to a window he remembered at the east end of the porch. He found the window open, and leaned into it, carefully parting the thin curtains in order to hear better even if he could not see.

"Avery, please loosen the ropes a little!" he heard Carlotta say pleadingly.

"To hell with you!" Morgan's voice answered coldly.

"You intend to kill me, don't you Avery?" Carlotta asked wearily.

"I'd do it right now, only I want to see your face while the boys and me work on Sam Littlejohn," Morgan answered bluntly. "By now, he's roped as tight as you are."

"Sam saved your life, and you'll repay that debt by killing him!" Carlotta said scathingly.

"He can thank you for that!" Morgan retorted. "You blabbed to him about me being boss of the Looters, then took off your dress and showed him the scars I put on you for getting nosey. I've got to shut his damned mouth, or he'll make trouble."

"I told Sam that you are the leader of the Looters," Carlotta said quietly. "I also told him of the beating you gave me, and showed him the scars on my back and shoulders. But I certainly did not remove my dress, Avery."

[*Turn page*]

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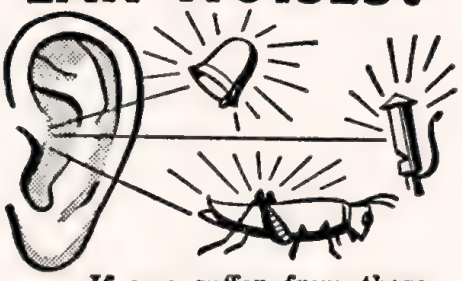

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"Shut up before I jam a boot heel into your mouth!" Morgan said wickedly. "The boys ought to be along with Sam Littlejohn any time, now. We'll take you two back in the woods, and when we're through with you it'll look like Big Foot and some of his Kiowa braves had been at work on you."

"Are you so depraved you'd actually torture humans to death?" Carlotta asked angrily.

Long Sam was already leaning through the window, getting his hands braced against the floor of the darkened room. He heard Avery Morgan curse Carlotta and begin beating her, the blows falling fast and with a sodden sound. The gaunt outlaw slithered across the window sill and into the room, rage making tom-tom sounds in his ears.

"Now can you keep your damn mouth shut?" Morgan's voice came pantingly as the sound of blows ended.

Carlotta did not reply. But Long Sam could hear her sobbing, and went toward the sound across the floor, crawling. Carlotta and her husband were on a sofa across the room, yet Long Sam could see neither of them. The wall where the sofa stood was windowless and the darkness there was thick.

The silently raging outlaw was trying to figure out some way of getting at Avery Morgan without endangering Carlotta when he heard horses coming in, at the back of the house.

"Here come the boys with Littlejohn!" Morgan cried. "Get ready for a rough time, sweetheart. I wanted you to live until that old daddy of yours kicked off so I could get my hands on that big ranch of his. But to hell with that!"

Morgan jumped to his feet, a sound of hard laughter in his throat. Long Sam saw the dim, shadowy outline of him there, and pulled a gun, trying desperately to see more clearly through the darkness. Then one of the riders who had arrived was riding around to the front of the house, pulling his horse to a halt at the steps.

"Come on in and give me a hand!"

Morgan called out. "My tattling wife is ready to take a little ride with us."

A SADDLE squealed outside, then a heavy man came across the porch and through the front door, moving ponderously. Long Sam pulled his second gun and held his breath, sweat streaming down his face in hot trickles.

"Over here," Morgan said. "Why did Ed and Dan stop out back?"

"We skirted the town and came in behind your place, Avery," a deep, lazy voice answered from the blackness. "Have you got Carlotta tied and ready to travel?"

Long Sam almost yelled, he was so astonished. And yet he felt that he should not have been so startled on learning the identity of the big man who had come into the room.

"Oh, no!" he heard Carlotta say in shock. "You are one of the Looters? You, Sheriff Jim Murry?"

"Would I like to see her face right now, Tiny!" Avery Morgan said tauntingly.

"Tiny?" Carlotta repeated. "But that was Sheriff Jim Murry's voice I heard."

"Sure, you know him as Jim Murry," Morgan said, chuckling. "But over in New Orleans, before the war, he was Tiny Bronson, one of the slickest footpads who ever cut a throat or cracked a skull. Tiny and me worked together, off and on. I sure got a surprise the day you and me drifted into this town and I spotted old Tiny wearing the sheriff's star and pretending to be a half-blind dimwit."

"So that's why we settled in this terrible place!" Carlotta said, and her voice was shaking.

"That's why you settled here, Carlotta," the sheriff said glumly. "I was keeping these people here fooled and letting the past go dead behind me, until Avery found me. The next thing I knew I was back in the old business of busting heads and not liking the game a bit. Sad, ain't it?"

"Quit feelin' sorry for yourself!" Avery Morgan said sullenly. "What's keeping Ed

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Millikin and Dan Shaddock so quiet?"

"Ed and Dan got their heads broke!" the sheriff said heavily. "What brains they ever had dripped out on the road as I brought their bodies up here."

"What happened, Tiny?" Morgan asked, shock in his voice. "Did Littlejohn—"

"Sam Littlejohn!" Carlotta's voice came thinly. "Oh, I should have known it! Avery, Ed Millikin and Dan Shaddock, your Looters, evidently found capturing Sam Littlejohn easier said than done!"

"Littlejohn wasn't easy to take, like you told me and the boys he would be, Avery," the big sheriff said grimly. "That long-shanked devil got clean away from us. You step outside with me and I'll tell you the details."

Long Sam had all he could do to keep from exploding into a denial of having killed Ed and Sam. But he hugged the floor, feeling the two men walk past within a few feet of him. When the screen door slapped behind them and their boots drummed the porch, the outlaw shoved his guns into holsters and began crawling on all fours toward the couch.

A sharply drawn breath from the darkness warned him that Carlotta had heard him moving. He hurried toward her and said desperately, "Keep quiet, Carlotta!"

"Thank God you're all right, Sam!" Her voice came to him in a trembling whisper.

Outside somewhere Avery Morgan's voice went up in a yell, chopping off thinly. But Long Sam barely noticed that. He butted the couch and sat up, groping hands finding Carlotta. Rope, drawn viciously tight, circled her body from shoulders to knees, and Long Sam went to work on the lumpy knots, prying and jerking savagely until the rope could be loosened.

"Now, girl!" he panted. "We'll scoot out the back way while Avery and that renegade sheriff are busy. But if we make any fuss doing it—Judas Priest!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a smothered groan. The sheriff's heavy tread was on the porch, slogging to the door. Long Sam pushed Carlotta back flat just as she

sat up, feeling her soft hair against his face as he put his lips close to her ear.

"Stay right here, no matter what comes!" he whispered.

LONG SAM scooted down the floor to the far end of the couch as the sheriff approached. The gaunt outlaw realized only then that the sheriff was alone.

"Carlotta?" the sheriff's voice came through the dark.

"What do you want?" she asked quickly.

The sheriff made a guttural sound that might have been laughter. The couch shivered as he bumped against it, and Long Sam came out of the shadows like a thunderbolt when Carlotta screamed. The sheriff yelled in pained surprise when Long Sam slammed into him, then they were crashing down in a hard fall. A pistol belched flame and thunderous sound at Long Sam as he rolled clear.

"You'd be Sam Littlejohn, I'd bet!" the sheriff bellowed, and the pistol in his hand thundered twice more as Murry tried to locate his attacker.

But Long Sam had expected those follow-up shots. He had bumped into a chair and kicked it tumbling, and the sheriff's second two bullets went hammering after the chair. Long Sam palmed his own pistols then, and they spewed flame and jarring sound as he laid a merciless fire across the spot where the sheriff's pistol had flashed. Through the deep roar of his guns Long Sam heard the sheriff's stricken cry and felt the floor vibrate as the big man wallowed in pain.

Long Sam quit firing and waited, his nerves drawn tight. He could hear Carlotta whimpering uneasily in the silence but kept quiet until he heard the sheriff cough and gag. He crawled over then, feeling his way, and pushed the muzzle of a cocked gun against yielding flesh, saying, "If you even wiggle, Murry, I'll shoot. Carlotta, get a lamp lit."

"No, Sam!" Carlotta's voice came sharply. "Avery is outside and would shoot the moment he saw you."

[*Turn page*]

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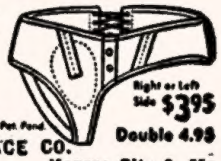

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"Something tells me you're a widow, Carlotta," Long Sam said soberly.

"That's right, Littlejohn." The sheriff's voice was a labored wheeze. "I broke Avery's head for him. Carlotta is sure a widder-woman."

"And you had already killed Dan Shaddock and Ed Millikin," Long Sam said gravely.

"Sure I had," the sheriff panted. "You or nobody else knew I was one of the Looters, Littlejohn. But you knew about Avery, for Carlotta told you about him. I knew you'd beat the truth out of Avery, if you got hold of him. I thought it over and decided the smart thing for me to do would be to fix Morgan and Shaddock and Millikin so none of them could ever tell anything on me. With them three dead, I could have gone on here, playing the dumb, half-blind sheriff. But you—"

His voice caught, became a bubbling cough. When the paroxysm passed he grew silent. Long Sam bent closer, listening carefully. There was no sound of breathing, now.

"I'll light the lamp, Sam," Carlotta said, moving on the couch.

"Don't bother," Long Sam said wearily. "This crooked badge-man is finished. Let's get out where the air is clean, and just wait until people come along to ask about this shooting."

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